SPECIAL TIME EDITION

Dungeons & Dragons

The Game That Changed the World

50
MAGICAL YEARS

The Birth of Roleplaying

The Power of Dice

Dragons That Heal

PLUS

Inside Live Play: *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20*

TIME

Dungeons & Dragons

Plastic miniatures, or minis, are often sold painted, but many Dungeon Masters prefer to paint their own. Alan Cooley of Main St. Board Game Cafe in Huntington, New York, hand-painted this dragon for the venue's D&D games.

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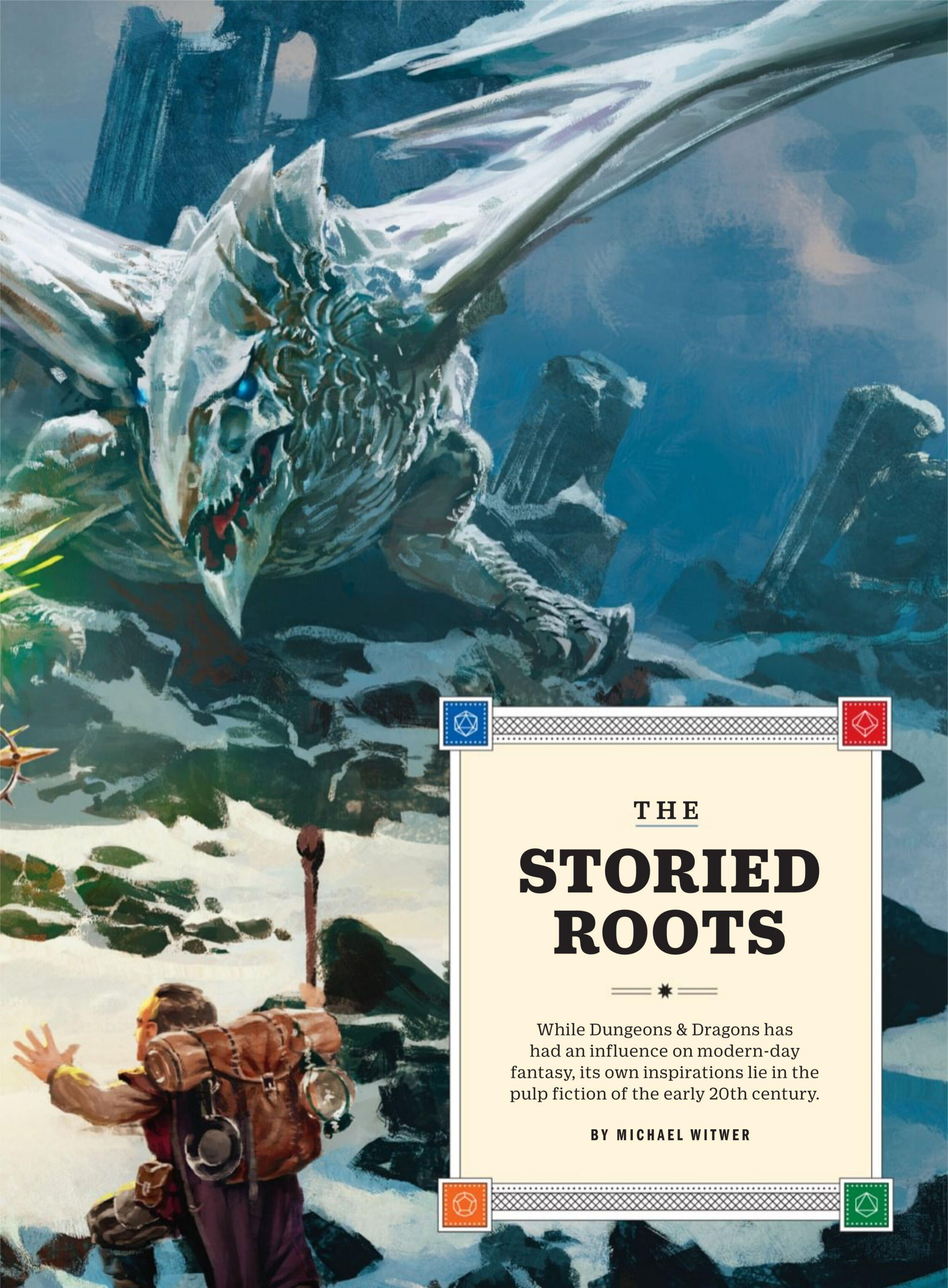
Beneath the City of Waterdeep, a beholder crime lord known as Xanathar believes it can gather information on everything in the multiverse.

White dragons live in mountain vales or icy caves. Their breath weapon is a frigid blast of cold damage.



THE

STORIED ROOTS

While Dungeons & Dragons has had an influence on modern-day fantasy, its own inspirations lie in the pulp fiction of the early 20th century.

BY MICHAEL WITWER

ON MARCH 5, 2008, EMMY AWARD–WINNING TELEVISION host and comedian Stephen Colbert closed his hit spoof news show, *The Colbert Report*, on an uncharacteristically somber note. "Before we go, nation, I have some sad news. Yesterday, Gary Gygax, creator of Dungeons & Dragons, passed away at age 69. Gary, you will be missed.... How much will you be missed?" Colbert asked in his signature deadpan. To the laughter of the studio audience, he revealed and rolled a 20-sided die. "Twenty. May your prismatic spray always bypass your target's reflex saving throw."

It was an odd tribute, even for a fake news show that spent most of its time making light of mainstream topics and events. By 2008, D&D was far from mainstream. But what the longtime D&D fan and future *Late Show* host knew was that D&D was relevant, and the death of its co-creator was big news.

And Colbert wasn't alone. There had been passing references on TV shows here, loving references in major MMOs or computer roleplaying games there. Colbert and the creators behind these innovations all knew something it took the rest of the world a bit longer to see: D&D—and Gygax, by extension—had changed the world. Over the '70s, '80s, and '90s, it had fundamentally shifted how people created and interacted with fantasy. It was a training ground for the imagination, growing and cultivating a generation of computer programmers, content creators, and game designers who would go on to build the infrastructure of the Information Age.

An estimated 50 million people have played the game; millions more watch others play on Twitch and YouTube. D&D books and video games regularly top best-seller lists; D&D-inspired TV shows swarm the streaming services, and a recent D&D movie even won the box office. The last decade or so has been kind to the game, and upon D&D's 50th anniversary, it's hardly a secret anymore, which is all the more remarkable given its humble, strange origins.

Published in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, in 1974, Dungeons & Dragons was the world's first roleplaying game. Created by small-town shoe repairman Gary Gygax and college history major Dave Arneson, the pioneering ruleset was a strange amalgam of disparate tabletop war and the strategy games of the day. Refereed and narrated by a nonplayer called the Dungeon Master, or DM, in D&D, each player creates and guides their own imaginary character—a hero with a tangible set of attributes, such as strength and dexterity. When it's time to try something that requires some real skill, like attacking a goblin, success is determined by a combination of your character's quantifiable talent and a roll of the dice. Using these means to adjudicate and resolve the action, the Dungeon Master guides a group of adventurers through dungeons and along generally preconceived storylines that only the DM knows. These elements may sound obvious today, but they were certainly not in 1974.

Called "the most influential game" by John Romero, cocreator of the seminal first-person shooter game *DOOM*, D&D would pioneer a slew of now ubiquitous gaming concepts. If you've ever lost "hit points" in a video game or "leveled up" in a retail rewards program, you have D&D to thank. That is to say, even if you don't play D&D, you still play D&D. It also introduced concepts around

Like J. R. R. Tolkien's elves, the elves of Dungeons & Dragons second edition did not die of old age—instead, they migrated to another land.

dungeon crawling and cooperative gameplay that have become mainstays in roleplaying, board, and video game design ever since.

But what might make the game unique—not coincidentally, the word appears in the name of the gaming genre that D&D pioneered, "roleplaying"—is the notion of gamified role assumption. In D&D, you play a role. That is, each individual assumes one or more specific characters that they "play," declaring actions for and even speaking for their character. This dynamic of player and Dungeon Master interaction creates something akin to group storytelling—a story in which no one, not even the Dungeon Master, knows exactly what will happen. Story. Without it, there is no D&D. And if story is at the heart of the game, what kind of stories might you tell? Perhaps just as important, what kind of stories inspired this strange game in the first place? The answer to that question lies in the speculative fiction of the early 20th century.

STRANGER THAN (PULP) FICTION

Fantasy. Science fiction. Today those terms conjure visions of blockbuster movie franchises, Triple-A video games, and some of the top series on television. From brands like Marvel and Star Wars to Harry Potter and Star Trek, the fantasy/sci-fi landscape is riddled with multibillion-dollar multimedia empires—many of the largest intellectual properties on the planet. But 100 years ago, most serious readers scoffed at these speculative genres, believing this type of literature wasn't worth the paper it was printed on—literally.

Named for the cheap wood-pulp paper they were produced with, "pulp magazines" of the '20s, '30s, and '40s came to define the genres of fantasy and science fiction while galvanizing their fan bases. An outgrowth of the literary magazine movement of the turn of the 20th century, and heavily inspired by the serialized fiction of renowned writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Edgar Rice Burroughs, these roughly 130-page short-story compilations were targeted to a somewhat less refined lot than their predecessors. The content was often violent and sometimes salacious, the covers racy, usually featuring illustrations of scantily clad women alongside equally provocative titles. Perhaps most important, they were half the cost of their glossy magazine counterparts, making them the perfect vehicle to attract young people high on dreams and hormones.

Proving the adage that "sex sells," this inexpensive form of entertainment flourished through the '20s and '30s, especially during the Great Depression, when their affordability allowed them to build a large and eager fan base. But if sex was what often got readers in the door, it was the imaginative content that really got them to stay. "Pulps" not only traded in mainline adventure, detective, and Western stories but found homes for the wild, fantastical, and weird emerging genres of fantasy, science fiction and horror. Publications such as *Amazing Stories*, *Unknown*, and *Weird Tales* found a healthy niche fan base alongside the more mainstream (and less racy) pulps like *Argosy* and *Blue Book*. Young writers with big ideas and little to lose, such as H.P. Lovecraft (the Cthulhu stories), Robert E. Howard (Conan the Barbarian series), and Fritz Leiber (Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser series), would find a regular paycheck in the churn of writing for the pulps. The stories were exciting and ephemeral: What evil sorcerer might Conan the Barbarian take on in next month's issue of *Weird Tales*? What sort of mischief would Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser be up to in the upcoming volume of *Unknown*?

D&D had changed the world. Over the '70s, '80s, and '90s, it had fundamentally shifted how people created and interacted with fantasy.

Meanwhile, across the pond, another fantasy movement was brewing, this one rooted in decidedly higher ideals than those of its North American counterpart. In 1937, heavily inspired by European mythology and fairy tales, an Oxford professor of philology named J.R.R. Tolkien would publish a juvenile novel called *The Hobbit*. In a story set in a beautiful but dangerous world called Middle-earth, Tolkien tells of an diminutive hero thrust into an "unexpected journey" fraught with mystical creatures, wise wizards, deadly monsters, and lost treasures. It was definitive high fantasy as we understand it today. The obsessive Tolkien carried on

The 20-sided die is the most important die in D&D, used for attack rolls since the early entries of the game. D&D 3rd edition's ruleset is referred to as the d20 System because it integrated the die into more core mechanics.

and continued developing his inspiring stories of Middle-earth, finally completing and publishing his magnum opus, the Lord of the Rings trilogy, over 1954 and 1955. But those expensive hardcovers would find only modest distribution and sales in Great Britain and the U.S., following the same trend of the pulps, which were very much on the decline by the mid-1950s due to the rise of competing entertainment such as television, digest magazines, and comic books.

By that time, most of the one-and-done stories from the pulps were lost to obscurity. Only a few remained in print, due to the efforts of committed editors and writers such as L. Sprague de Camp and Lin Carter, who preserved them through small-press anthologies. Meanwhile, a budding group of fantasy/science fiction authors who had emerged from the pulp tradition, such as Jack Vance (Dying Earth series), Poul Anderson (*Three Hearts and Three Lions*), and Michael Moorcock (Elric of Melniboné series) inched the genre forward with their pulp-style fantasy novels of the '50s and '60s.

But then something remarkable happened—and all because of a lost ring.

In 1965, a U.S. publisher produced a series of dirt-cheap, unlicensed paperbacks of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy, which somehow found the right market at the right time and price point. Sales exploded, bringing these formerly obscure works to the mainstream and dragging with them any other type of fantasy that existed in mass-market form, including the fantasy anthologies that had rescued beloved pulp stories from oblivion. A fantasy craze had begun—and two Midwestern wargamers who had grown up with the pulps took notice.

FROM PULPS TO PLAY

Wargaming during the 1960s was an esoteric hobby practiced by a small and disparate community of mostly young people scattered across the country. Some purchased board wargames, such as Avalon Hill's *Gettysburg* (1958), while others could be played with a variety of miniatures on a table with homemade terrain that emulates a battlefield. With a focus on replaying and simulating famous battles,

In Greek mythology, the Lernaean Hydra was a nine-headed, poisonous, watersnake-like monster. The D&D iteration may have up to 50 heads in rare cases.

The use of minatures in Dungeons & Dragons has always been optional. Players can also use ad hoc pieces like bottle caps or spare dice to illustrate battle positioning.

such as those of Napoleon, the American Civil War, or WWII, accuracy was paramount—there wasn't much room for the fantastical.

In 1969, a pulp fantasy enthusiast and passionate wargamer named Gary Gygax observed, "There is a great interest in wargames of ancient and medieval times, but few games are published." He subsequently partnered with a local wargamer named Jeff Perren and made one himself, called *Chainmail*. Published in 1971, *Chainmail* was a 60-page digest-size booklet of miniature wargame rules that sought to "interest the wargamer sufficiently to start him on the pursuit of Medieval History." But with 20 years of fantasy spinning around in his head, from the pulp stylings of Robert E. Howard to the new and readily accessible craze led by the works of Tolkien, Moorcock, Anderson, and Vance, Gygax landed on a wild idea.

He would add a section at the end of the ruleset called the "Fantasy Supplement," because "most of the fantastic battles related in novels more closely resemble medieval warfare than they do earlier or later forms of combat." The 14-page supplement goes on to promise that these rules allow players to "refight the epic struggles related by J.R.R. Tolkien, Robert E. Howard, and other fantasy writers," and the game included rules to play with Tolkienesque creatures such as hobbits, ents, and balrogs. You could even play with single-entity, higher-power units called wizards, heroes, and superheroes—the last term swiped from the popular Marvel and DC comics of the day. With this, the fantasy game was born.

Gygax's *Chainmail* would especially intrigue one of his wargaming acquaintances, a University of Minnesota history student named Dave Arneson. Arneson and his Twin Cities gaming group had been experimenting with all manner of war and strategy games, some of which included a degree of role assumption, including creating and acting as your own singular character.

When Arneson got hold of *Chainmail,* he found a ruleset that featured fantasy archetypes and combat mechanics he could use for a fantasy scenario he had been planning for his group, called Blackmoor. According to Arneson, he had been

"reading a Conan book" the day before he ran his first Blackmoor session—no doubt an inspiration for the dank dungeons beneath Castle Blackmoor. When Gygax heard reports of this alluring new fantasy dungeon game being played in the Twin Cities, he asked to see whatever rules Arneson had developed. A brief demo some months later led to a collaboration between the two on a new type of game, one that would come to be called Dungeons & Dragons.

When D&D was published in 1974, the pulpy fingerprints of *Weird Tales* and other midcentury fantasy were all over it. A cooperative but diverse set of adventurers setting out to save a mystical world full of elves, dwarves, goblins, and dragons: A check for Tolkien. A ragtag group of scallywags out for treasure and fame: A check for Leiber. A grotesque collection of otherworldly creatures and monsters to battle: A check for Lovecraft. A system of magic where spells are erased from the user's memory once cast: A check for Vance. Holy warriors whose abilities of healing and protection are powered by faith: A check for Anderson. A brutal and uncaring world where magic is rare and unnatural, and the golden rule is kill or be killed: A check for Howard.

"Pulp fiction delivered a visceral, immersive narrative of fantastic adventure," as games historian and author Jon Peterson puts it. "These were stories that demanded more than just to be read—fans wanted to experience these adventures themselves. Finally, in 1974, D&D provided a technology that made that possible, and that technology, whether instantiated on a tabletop or a desktop, has been a dominant force in popular culture ever since."

Despite trading among the most ephemeral fiction of their day, the pulp and fantasy authors of the early and mid-20th century would go on to leave an indelible mark upon D&D. Gygax would make the connection entirely unambiguous in the game's foreword: "These rules are strictly fantasy. Those wargamers who lack imagination, those who don't care for Burrough's Martian adventures where John Carter is groping through black pits, who feel no thrill upon reading Howard's Conan saga, who do not enjoy the de Camp and Pratt fantasies or Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser pitting their swords against evil sorceries will not be likely to find DUNGEONS and DRAGONS to their taste. But those whose imaginations know no bounds will find that these rules are the answer to their prayers."

THE D&D FANTASY BRIDGE

Today, the influence of Dungeons & Dragons upon not just writers but pretty much all contemporary content creators cannot be overstated. Why? Because D&D is everywhere, and whether or not someone happens to play D&D or one of its many roleplaying game descendants or derivatives, they are still experiencing D&D in some form everywhere they go.

It's impossible to engage in just about any digital game or even social media without touching an element that was once unique to D&D. Fantasy fiction, movies, and television rely heavily on the detailed taxonomy of fantasy monsters, classes, and cultures that D&D brought to the forefront through the game.

Whether a core thematic element of *Stranger Things,* the inspiration for a best-selling novel like those of R.A. Salvatore's storied Drizzt saga, or even a streaming actual play show like *Critical Role,* where we watch a group of gamers create a story before our very eyes (some of which have gone on to be adapted to other forms of content, such as with Amazon's *The Legend of Vox Machina*), D&D's sooted fingerprints are all over contemporary content everywhere.

National Book Award winner Ta-Nehisi Coates suggests that the game introduced him to the "powers of imagination." A-list director Jon Favreau agrees, positing that D&D gave him "a really strong background in imagination, storytelling, understanding how to create tone and a sense of balance." Both the Star Wars and Marvel franchises owe him thanks, and D&D by extension.

The unique, interactive game mechanics of D&D not only allow players to be part of the story but demand that they participate in building it. In other words, you don't just play D&D; you create it. It's no wonder that so many of the leading creatives and innovators of the Information Age cite the game as such a formative influence, and why its concepts are so ubiquitous today. No matter how the next 50 years go for the Dungeons & Dragons brand, its legacy is secure as an inescapable influence on the creators of tomorrow. ◆

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Named for author H. P. Lovecraft, Lovecraftian or eldritch horror is a natural part of the D&D universe.

CHAPTER 1

Origins

The landmark tabletop roleplaying game has gone through many iterations and evolutions in the past 50 years.

Goblins are one of the earliest creatures to exist in D&D. They have been included in every edition.

The Game's Journey

The quintessential roleplaying game has been viewed as a niche hobby, a satanic beacon, and now as an expansive media franchise.

BY AVA ERICKSON

IN 1987, EVANGELICAL THEOLOGIANS George Grant and Peter Leithart published a 17-page book called *A Christian Response to Dungeons and Dragons: The Catechism of the New Age*. The cover featured an illustration of an evil-looking dragon clutching one child in his fist while reaching menacingly toward another. The authors claimed that, among other evils, Dungeons & Dragons promoted witchcraft, devil worship, and magic and was corrupting the minds of America's Christian youth. "Dungeons and Dragons is a dangerous game. It serves as an introduction to evil, a catechism of occultism, a primer for the ABCs of the New Age. It is a recruiting tool of Satan," read the conclusion. But despite Grant and Leithart's warnings, D&D's popularity continued to grow—and grow and grow, until its themes didn't seem particularly extreme or unconventional after all.

Now, 50 years after its creation, D&D is no longer a niche hobby, feared by those who don't understand it. Instead, it is a quintessential part of pop culture, with an estimated 50 million players globally. And *A Christian Response to Dungeons and Dragons* has a 2.3-star rating on Goodreads.

Over five decades, the franchise has reinvented and rewritten itself to appeal to a wider audience and keep players engaged.

CHAINMAIL AND WHITE BOX EDITION

In the '60s and '70s, Gary Gygax was part of a small, but passionate community of tabletop wargamers in the Midwest. An insurance underwriter, Jehovah's Witness, and father of five, Gygax would meet with his friends during his free time to clash giant armies of miniature figurines in large-scale battles. Maneuvers were determined by rolling dice, and one player would serve as a judge to help settle disputes, which were typically related to minute historical details of World War II, the Civil War, or whatever other military era the group was into at the moment. "It was kind of stodgy and historically focused, and the people that were into this were super serious," says Jon Peterson, a roleplaying-game historian and author of *Playing at the World,* who explains that the majority of the wargaming community was white and male. "I would say it was typically conservative. Especially against the backdrop of '60s counterculture," he adds. Because it was such a niche hobby, the rules to these wargames were not very

established, so players formed governing societies, at both the national and local level, and published rules and supplements in amateur newsletters and fanzines that were disseminated throughout the community. Gygax particularly loved tweaking rules and creating supplemental guides, and he even teased other wargamers who were too married to the rules. "They'd write in and ask the publisher of the game what to do. Whatever they were told, they did. And I said, 'That's silly—just make it up,'" he said in a 2007 interview with *Wired*.

In 1970, Gygax lost his job at the insurance company and started working as a cobbler. "We were desperately poor. My mom would garden to put food on the table and make bread as opposed to buying bread, all those things to try to save money," says Gygax's son Luke. Trying to make ends meet, Gygax took a stab at game designing professionally. By that time, he had become fascinated by medieval warfare, like his friend Jeff Perren, a fellow member of the Lake Geneva Tactical Studies Association. Perren had drafted some rules for a new game that Gygax expanded and dubbed *Chainmail*. In *Chainmail,* a single miniature represented one character or hero as opposed to an entire military unit, as was typical in most war games,

You can now tour Gygax's home in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin (above). Though the game was developed in his home, Gygax (opposite left) worked at the TSR offices circa 1983. Opposite right: Gygax with (from left) Peter Adkison, founder of Wizards of the Coast, and Richard Garfield, inventor of Magic the Gathering.

and a supplemental set of rules featured fantastical elements like elves and wizards. Gygax originally published the rules in the *Domesday Book,* a zine created by the Castle & Crusade Society (which was founded by Gygax), but he was quickly met with pushback from the rest of the wargaming community, who, Gygax said, wouldn't even speak to him after *Chainmail* came out. They were history buffs unamused by the fantasy elements. But he soldiered on, and in 1971, the game was published by Guidon Games, a small Indiana-based wargaming publisher. While it was hardly flying off the shelves, it did become Guidon Games' biggest hit, selling around 100 copies per month.

Excited by the idea that game designing could be his full-time job, Gygax had also been collaborating with Minnesota-based wargamer and Castle &

Dungeons & Dragons was a combination of two groups: the wargaming community and the fantasy and science-fiction fandoms.

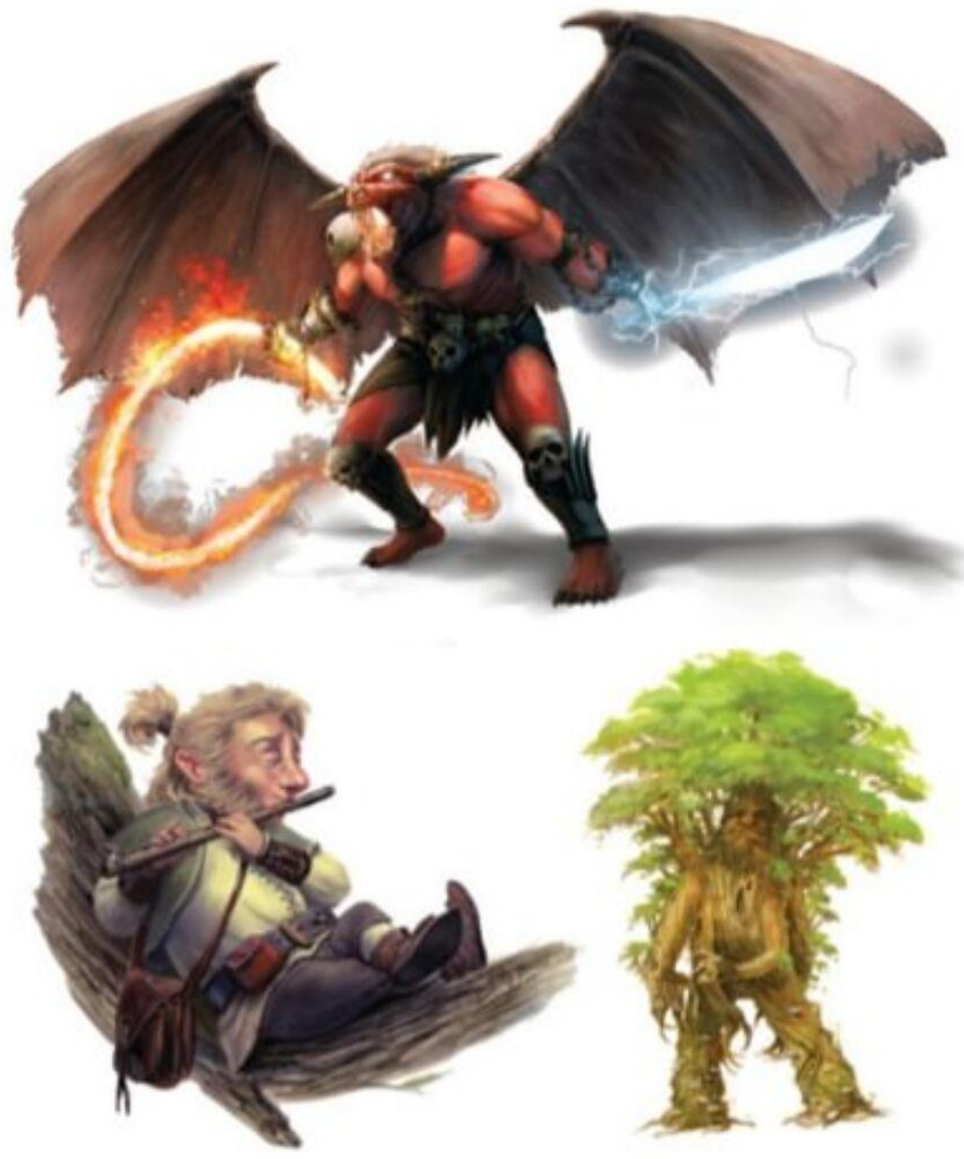
Crusade Society member Dave Arneson on another game, called *Don't Give Up the Ship*. (The two had met at GenCon, a gaming convention hosted by Gygax, in 1969 and bonded over their interest in Napoleonic-era naval warfare.) *Don't Give Up the Ship* players used dice, rulers, and protractors to determine moves, pushing large fleets of model sailing ships across the floor. The game was ultimately published by Guidon Games a year after *Chainmail*.

Arneson was also a fan of *Chainmail,* and he had been incorporating the rules, especially the elements from the fantasy supplement, into his own long-running campaign, called *Blackmoor*. Unlike the other wargaming campaigns of the time, the *Blackmoor* campaign was far less concerned with historical accuracy, and players didn't always stick to the rulebooks. As the leader of the game, Arneson also took on a role far more involved than that of a simple referee. He would set the scene with detailed descriptions of monsters and other fantastical beings as the players descended into a six-floor dungeon he had dreamed up. "A dungeon is nice and self-contained," Arneson told *Wired* in 2008. "Players can't go romping over the countryside, and you can control the situation." It was in *Blackmoor* where the idea of dungeon adventuring was born. "You would have to explore, and you would have to draw maps so you wouldn't get lost as you went through it," explains Peterson.

When Gygax heard about the campaign, he reached out to see if he could incorporate some of the rules into a *Chainmail* supplement. Arneson and his crew ended up driving down to Lake Geneva to play with Gygax. They encountered a troll with magic armor during that game, and that's when Gygax understood just how incredible Arneson's ideas really were. "Gary realized this was a much bigger idea than just something he was going to tack on to a new expansion to *Chainmail,* and that is when the work toward Dungeons & Dragons commenced," says Peterson, who explains that Dungeons & Dragons was really a combination of two groups: the wargaming community that Gygax and Arneson were a part of, and the fantasy and sci-fi fandoms that also existed at the time. "They started experimenting, as a number of people were at the time, with how you could simulate a fantastic world and fantastic people," he says. Guidon Games was not interested in role-playing, so Gygax ended up breaking off from the company in 1973.

Over a period of several months, Gygax and Arneson sent rules and ideas back and forth by mail, and tension started brewing. "Arneson was definitely an idea guy, whereas Gygax was somebody who understood how to build consensus around a set of rules, socialize them, get them into a form other people at least had a chance of understanding," says Peterson. Gygax wanted a rule for every situation, while Arneson wanted it to be more free-form, allowing people to use their imagination like he had during the *Blackmoor* campaign. But despite some creative differences, D&D started coming together.

In the first official test game, Gygax gathered two of his children, his childhood friend Don Kaye, and another neighborhood kid. Gygax instructed each player to pick a character. He then gave them a card with a list of attributes and had them roll a six-sided die to determine how much of each attribute their character had. Then he led them down into the dungeon, which was full of unexpected treasure and monsters, and had them make choices in line with their character's attributes. "Roleplaying isn't storytelling. If the dungeon master is directing it, it's not a game," he said in 2007. Gygax then began brainstorming names, and when Dungeons & Dragons received the seal of approval from his 4-year-old daughter, it was settled.



But Gygax and Arneson hit another roadblock when they tried to find a gaming company to publish it. The companies turned a profit by selling miniature gaming pieces; D&D only required dice and a pen and paper, and they didn't see how they could profit solely from a rulebook. Undeterred, Gygax partnered with Kaye to launch his own publishing company,

Tactical Studies Rules (TSR). Notably, he didn't include Arneson in the company, saying he wasn't much of a business person. They scraped together some money, assembled the rulebook by hand in Gygax's basement, and printed 1,000 copies (a small fraction of the 50,000 copies Gygax said they could sell when pitching the game to Avalon Hill, then the biggest wargame publisher).

In 1974, D&D officially hit the market. It took about 10 months for the first printing to sell out, but the second printing started taking off, and soon Gygax was receiving calls 24 hours a day from players around the country, quizzing him on the rules or asking him to Dungeon Master over the phone. Luke Gygax, a military veteran and game designer, recalls attending conventions with his father where people would ask for his autograph. "It was very apparent that he was a well-respected game designer and figure in the community, which he enjoyed—not in a pompous way. He would always talk with people. He loved to chat with gamers and hear their ideas," says Luke, who explains that gamers would often approach his father with their own ideas for games, and Gygax would almost always write to them with notes and suggestions. "He came up in a very small community where everyone tried to help each other," Luke says.

IN THE PRESS

In late 1977, TSR received a letter from the licensing company that controlled some of the rights to writer J.R.R. Tolkien's intellectual property. It posed objections to TSR using certain mythical creatures such as hobbit, balrog, and ent, saying they infringed on copyright. Interestingly, Gygax was not a fan of Tolkien's work. "It was so dull. I mean, there was no action in it. I'd like to throttle Frodo," he told *Wired* in 2007. It was ultimately decided that ideas, including dragons and goblins, were in the public domain. But hobbits, ents, and balrogs became halflings, treants, and balor.

Tension had also been brewing between Arneson and Gygax, whose creative differences continued to spark conflict. TSR ultimately did hire Arneson to work for the company, but he was unhappy with his position. "By the time Arneson got down to Lake Geneva in 1976, he already felt like he wasn't able to contribute to the work that was ongoing on the system," says Peterson. By 1976, Arneson was out, but that was only the beginning of the feud.

Some intellectual property was reworked to avoid copyright issues, including (opposite, top) balors, treants, and halflings. Opposite, bottom: Tabletop figurines at Geneva Lake Museum. Top: Dr. Joyce Brothers defended D&D on a Toronto radio station. Above: Teens played the game in 1991.

Just a year later, TSR published two new versions of the game: Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (AD&D) and Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set. While Arneson had been receiving 5 percent in royalties from TSR, Gygax argued this new version was different enough that he was no longer entitled. Arneson sued, and in 1981 the case was settled, with Arneson receiving 2.5 percent on certain AD&D titles.

AD&D expanded and refined the rules set forth in the original version of the game, making them much clearer. In a major step-up for the company, AD&D came as a set of three hardcover books, as opposed to

the booklets of the previous version. These core rulebooks, which were published between 1977 and 1979, included the *Monster Manual,* the *Players Handbook,* and the *Dungeon Masters Guide.* Basic Sets were designed for novices just beginning a campaign, offering detailed rules for character creation and instructions for both players and Dungeon Masters.

By launching both lines of products simultaneously, TSR was able to widen its audience and bring in new players, but the game remained relatively unknown in mainstream media. That is, until it appeared in the national news.

In 1979, D&D player and Michigan State University student James Dallas Egbert III went missing. William Dear, a private detective hired by Egbert's family, became convinced D&D was to blame. "You're leaving the world of reality into the world of fantasy. It advocated murder. Decapitation. And I'm going, 'This isn't a healthy game,'" Dear said in 2016. News outlets and evangelical groups quickly latched on to the story, sparking a nationwide conspiracy that D&D had somehow driven Egbert to insanity, with many reporting that he had ventured into Michigan State's underground tunnels in some sort of satanic D&D ritual. The claims were unsubstantiated, and Egbert was found a month later. He died by suicide a year after his disappearance.

The sale of Wizards of the Coast to Hasbro also allowed D&D to expand to new mediums beyond the core rulebooks.

These events occurred on the precipice of the Satanic Panic of the 1980s, a moral panic during which paranoia and conspiracy theories about satanism and satanic ritual abuse were rampant. As the Satanic Panic ramped up, D&D became just one of its numerous targets. The 1982 TV movie *Mazes and Monsters* starring Tom Hanks only added fuel to the fire. Complete with satanic and cult imagery, it follows a group of college students whose obsession with fantasy roleplaying games leads to tragedy. In 1982, another D&D player died by suicide, and in 1983, his mother, Patricia A. Pulling, formed an organization called Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons (BADD) to advocate against D&D, saying the game promoted voodoo, sex perversion, barbarism, and necromantics.

"We were raised Christian. We would go to church often, and religion was important in my family, so to hear people say [D&D] was satanic was kind of shocking," says Luke Gygax, who says his father began receiving death threats. "People would drive by our house slowly, which worried my parents a lot. So we had to erect a six-foot cyclone fence around our house and put in a security system and we had our dogs run at night, and my dad made sure he was armed whenever he left the house." Gygax even began wearing a bulletproof vest to conventions. TSR soon hired Dr. Joyce Brothers, a famous psychologist and television personality, to counter the criticism D&D was facing in the media. "There is good and evil in life, and the way Dungeons & Dragons is set up is that good triumphs over evil," she said in a radio interview with Canadian talk-show host Neil McKenty.

In 2008, reflecting on the controversy, Arneson (who died in 2009) suggested parents should have just watched their kids play the game. "They will understand that anything this nerdy can't possibly lead to being possessed by the devil," he said. But despite the bad press, the moral panic ended up benefiting sales. The previously niche hobby was making the news.

D&D'S RISE AND FALL (AND RISE)

In the early '80s, amid the chaos of the Satanic Panic, D&D officially entered its heyday, generating $16 million in sales in 1982. With his newfound wealth, Gary Gygax separated from his wife and moved to Beverly Hills, California, where he reportedly hosted cocaine-filled parties at his mansion. (*Milwaukee Magazine* even coined him the "Lord of the Nerds.") While in Hollywood, he was working on a *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon, which ended up running from 1983 to 1985.

In 1983, over 600,000 units of D&D were sold. But sales fell just as quickly as they rose, and in 1984, TSR sales didn't even reach 200,000 units. The reason for the fall was manyfold. On one hand, because D&D didn't require figurines, a board, or any other game pieces, profiting off players after they bought the rulebooks became a major problem for TSR. Additionally, trying to keep up with

Alan Cooley (left) was hired by Main St. Board Game Cafe in Huntington, New York, to run a weekly D&D game for teens and tweens.

its unexpected success, it hired dozens of new employees, but sales had started to level off as the company failed to adjust to shifts in consumer spending on hobby games. Gygax blamed the financial trouble on his fellow board members Kevin and Brian Blume, who he said purchased around 70 company cars and $1.5 million in furniture when he was in L.A. Essentially, TSR overestimated how much sales would continue to rise, sinking it into serious financial trouble.

In 1984, TSR began publishing novels based on D&D, set in the Dragonlance universe. The books were originally conceived by husband-and-wife duo Tracy and Laura Hickman, working with editor Margaret Weis. There are now more than 200 D&D-inspired books, written by a variety of authors, with the most recent being 2024's *Dragons of Eternity*.

After a series of layoffs, in 1985, Gygax hired businesswoman Lorraine Williams. Williams could see the company's potential, and in October of that year she went behind Gygax's back, purchasing his partners' shares, which made her the majority shareholder. Fed up and feeling betrayed, Gygax, who felt like the company was being taken over by non-gamers, sold his own shares in 1985 and officially left TSR.

The company culture changed under Williams, and many gamers have blamed her for just about every bad thing that happened to TSR. She was notoriously tough and rarely interacted with employees on the creative side. "She was not always in touch with what we did, but she was very loyal. … Her reputation was so great and almost mythologized, where people were afraid to say no to her," Jim Fallone, director of sales and marketing at TSR, said in D&D historian Ben Riggs' 2022 book *Slaying the Dragon: A Secret History of Dungeons & Dragons*. There were even rumors that she was the model for the Lady of Pain character from the *Planescape* setting. But despite (or perhaps because of) her tough leadership style, the company continued to thrive.

The design team was led by David "Zeb" Cook, a former English teacher from Nebraska who had been working at TSR for years. Along with a small team of other designers, Cook began to work on a second edition of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons. While the rulebook maintained many of the core principles and design elements of the previous edition, some of the rules were honed, making them easier to follow. Steve Winter, one of the other second-edition designers, described the original rules to Riggs as "having a one-on-one conversation with

Gary Gygax. They were charming but not much help when a question arose in the middle of a battle." Released in 1989, the second edition was a success, with over 400,000 copies sold in the first year.

The company also began expanding the universe, publishing a large number of supplements. Some of the most famous were *Forgotten Realms,* which explored a mysterious parallel world; *Planescape,* which brought players through inter-dimensional magical portals; and *Ravenloft,* in which players traversed a much darker setting, meeting sinister forces along the way. These new settings were elevated from previous products, which tended to include only the rules and perhaps some dice. "Full-color maps, posters, player guides, dice, miniatures, video cassettes, and CDs made them a feast at the gaming table.... From a fan's point of view, these products are incredible. They are storehouses of story and playgrounds for dreams," Riggs wrote in *Slaying the Dragon.*

Williams continued to expand the brand into other mediums throughout the late '80s and '90s, including licensing D&D properties to DC Comics. The books sold well, but when TSR tried to publish their own line of comics, the relationship with DC soured. Williams was able to pull TSR out of the hole by expanding the brand, but while D&D sales remained steady through the early '90s, they began to dip toward the latter half of the decade.

SALES, ACQUISITIONS, AND THE D20 BOOM

By the mid-1990s, TSR was in serious financial trouble. Each new supplement the company published sold worse than the one before it. Buried in debt and nearing bankruptcy, in 1997, TSR was ultimately sold to the gaming company Wizards of the Coast via an intermediary, the small gaming company Five Rings Publishing. As part of the deal, Wizards also bought Five Rings. At the time, Wizards of the Coast dominated the tabletop and collectible card game industry with games like Magic: The Gathering, the product that created the collectible card-game genre.

After the acquisition, Wizards of the Coast had employees Ryan Dancey and Lisa Stevens investigate TSR's finances to figure out why the company had been going under. The two discovered that for the prices D&D products were sold for, TSR would never have been able to recoup the sunk costs of production. "[W]e realized that there were entire campaign settings that had never been profitable," Dancey said in *Slaying the Dragon.* Furthermore, with the large number of campaign settings, the company was cannibalizing its own customer base: Essentially, the customers became fans of one setting, pitting each new setting against the rest. "[T]he company was stealing customers from itself, forcing it to make two products to keep the same number of customers," Riggs wrote. In 1999, Hasbro bought Wizards of the Coast, but it remained semi-independent until 2001 when it was consolidated into Hasbro's game division.

In 2000, the third edition of Dungeons & Dragons was released, with the first major rule revision in over a decade. Even though the basic editions had been discontinued several years prior, the second edition was still referred to as Advanced D&D. But with the third edition, the word "advanced" was dropped, and the game just became D&D.

Since the game's origin, various D&D rules and supplements have used all kinds of exotic dice, including the d20, but the third edition standardized the system. "They [d20 dice] became just so ineluctably bound to the look and feel of playing D&D. The experience of D&D is so about these weird little math rocks, as kids call them today," says Peterson.

Led by game designer Jonathan Tweet, the d20 system aimed to standardize systems across roleplaying games by using the 20-sided die to determine most of the core actions. A Q&A published on Wizards of the Coast's website read, "The company believes that one of the major factors which caused the collapse of the commercial tabletop RPG market from 1993 to 1996 was the proliferation of different, incompatible core game systems." Hence they released the system under the Open Game License, which allowed other companies to use it without paying for the license, leading to a huge boom in roleplaying games in the early 2000s.

The sale to Hasbro also allowed D&D to expand to new mediums beyond the rulebook, launching toys and paraphernalia in conjunction with Hasbro's other toys. Although they're not necessary to play, figurines and miniatures had long been a part of the game for many players. But under the supervision of Hasbro in 2003, Wizards of the Coast expanded the production of miniatures, releasing multiple unique sets over the next few years. Additionally, Hasbro's large-scale distribution capabilities allowed D&D to be sold in big-box stores such as Walmart and Target when it had previously only been available in specialty gaming stores.

Early D&D adventures codified the idea of a dungeon crawl, where players spend sessions exploring a dungeon created by their Dungeon Master or lifted from a sourcebook.

In 2008, a few months before the fourth edition of D&D was released, Gygax passed away after a series of strokes. While he was no longer officially tied to D&D, he was eternally associated with it by players, so gamers around the world held D&D games in his honor, including a group of his friends and family, who met at Lake Geneva's American Legion Hall. They played games and watched the D&D cartoon, and people shared memories about Gygax.

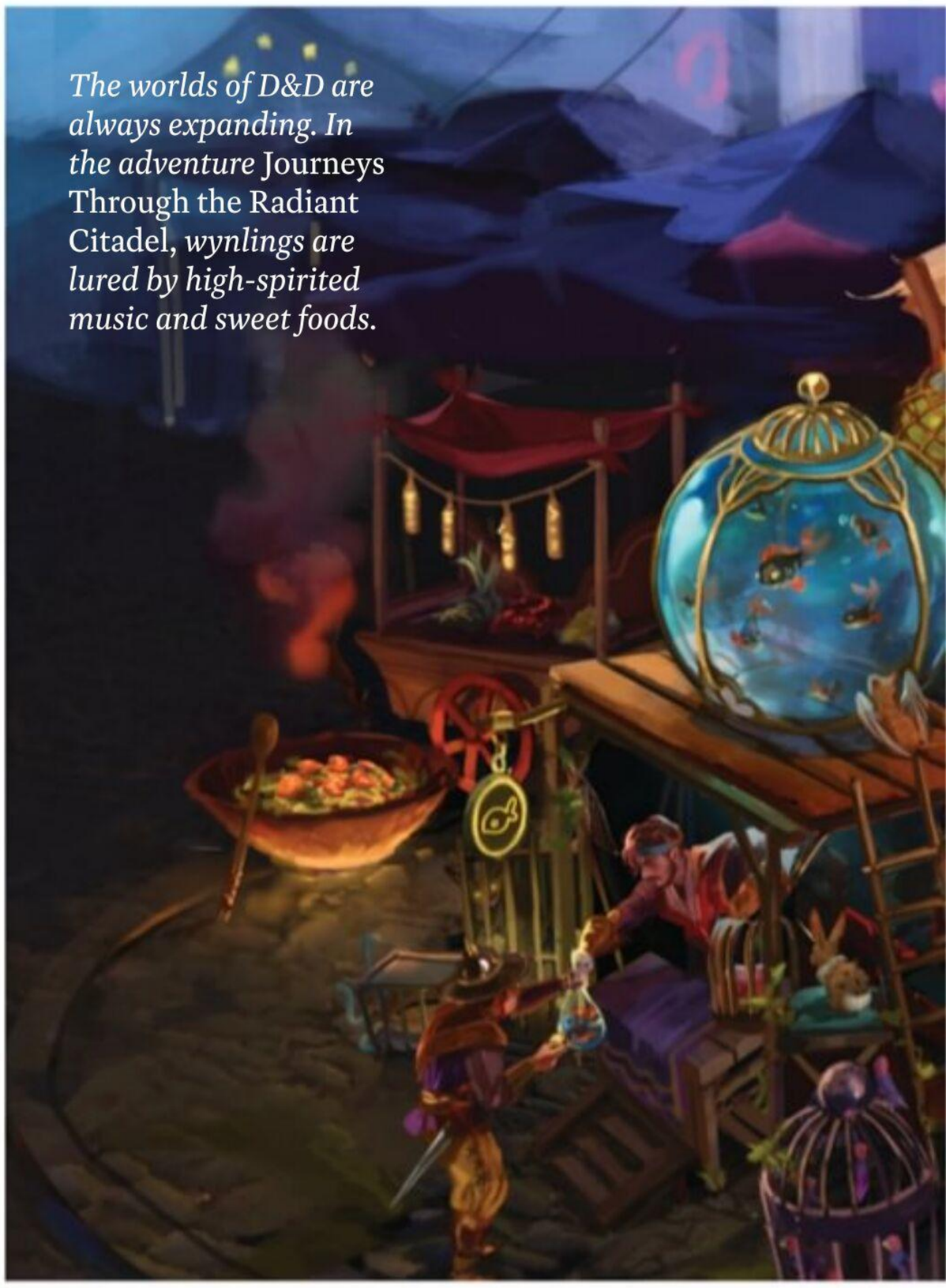
"That was really cathartic for my family, to see so many people gathered together enjoying what he loved so much: playing games and the camaraderie of other people," says Luke Gygax. The event went on to become an important tradition. "I hold Gary Con every year in March as a memorial to my dad, and it's up to like 3,500 people now. It's become quite a cornerstone of the gaming community," says Luke, who aims to preserve his father's legacy and memory. "He taught us that we can all still play and use our imagination, and how freeing that is. We play make-believe all the time as kids, and my dad gave everyone the tools to continue playing."

A NEW GENERATION

In the 2010s, D&D sales were suffering again. With the rise in roleplaying video games, interest in tabletop games was waning. But with the launch of fifth edition D&D in 2014, the game found new life.

Peterson partly attributes this to the rising popularity of the fantasy genre in general. Thanks to shows like *Game of Thrones,* which started airing in 2011, fantasy became a more integral part of mainstream pop culture. Additionally, actual play started gaining popularity, with the most famous show, *Critical Role,* first streaming in 2015. "One of the things that D&D never managed to crack in its early years was how to teach new players how to play," says Peterson. "You kind of had to find an experienced group and play with them . . . to kind of get how to do it." On streaming platforms such as Twitch and YouTube, people could watch other gamers play and learn how to play themselves.

The updated rules also aimed to flesh out any confusing elements of previous rulebooks and focused more on roleplaying, character customization, and storytelling and less on strategic tactical planning."I think they did a good job in fifth edition of being very reverential of D&D's past, and so kind of keeping the people who were really into the older stuff on board by having so many callbacks to the different worlds and adventures and characters that had been popularized over the decades, and just plugging that into this new streamlined engine that is a modern masterpiece of RPG design," Peterson says.



The worlds of D&D are always expanding. In the adventure Journeys Through the Radiant Citadel, *wynlings are lured by high-spirited music and sweet foods.*

D&D got a major bump in popularity in 2016, when Netflix released the first season of *Stranger Things.* The show takes place in the 1980s and follows a group of friends who begin to unravel the mysteries behind supernatural forces in their small town. The kids are frequently seen playing D&D in the first season, and some of the show's elements are even inspired by the game. The Demogorgon, one of the main antagonists on the show, has appeared in every edition of D&D, and Vecna, another character on *Stranger Things,* is a longtime D&D boss villain and the titular star of a brand-new adventure, Vecna: Eve of Ruin, launched for D&D's 50th anniversary.

Additionally, in a similar dynamic to a D&D campaign, the show's characters take on certain roles. Mike Wheeler is smart and moral, Will Byers is clever

and selfless, and Eleven is loyal and protective. The show sparked a wave of nostalgia for those who grew up playing the game, and it also inspired new players to pick up the hobby. One analysis found that Google searches for Dungeons & Dragons starter kits increased by 250 percent during the show's fourth season in 2022, when some of the main characters joined the Hellfire Club, their high school D&D group.

In 2017, D&D got another major upgrade with the launch of D&D Beyond, an online tool for the fifth edition that allows users to digitally access rulebooks, character sheets, and spells. According to Adam Bradford, the product lead, the goal was to enhance the D&D experience, not turn it into a video game. "We want to minimize the negative impact of rules at the table, such as taking a long time thumbing through books to find an obscure rule or not remembering all your character's options," he said in a 2017 interview with Gizmodo Australia.

Even though D&D campaigns had to stop or go virtual, the game had another major boom during the pandemic, with a 33 percent increase in sales in 2020. "We have seen a substantial increase in interest in tabletop gaming overall in the last year," Dan Leeder, vice president of operations at Noble Knight Games, told CNBC in 2021.

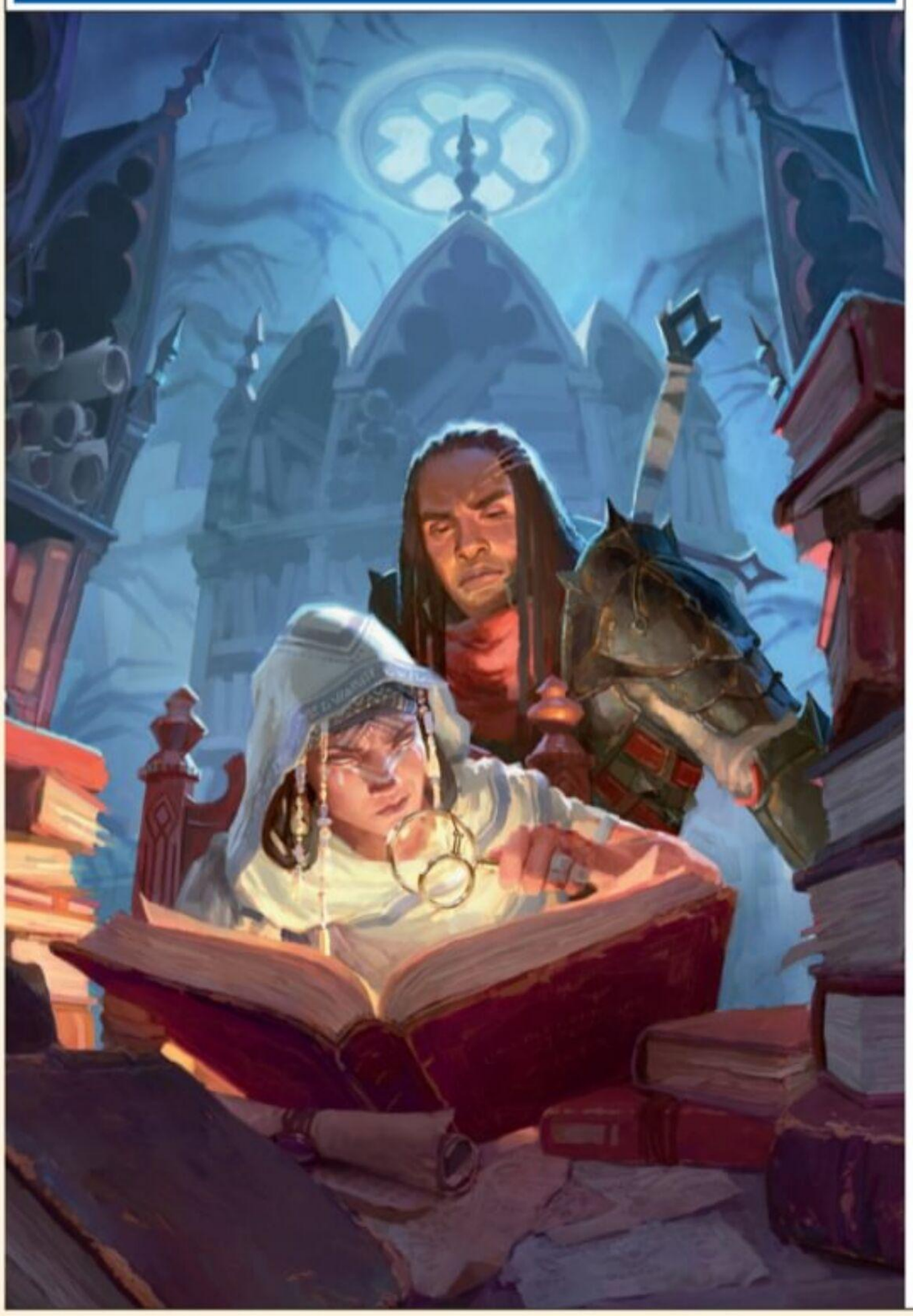
Now, as D&D celebrates its 50th anniversary, its impact on not only the gaming industry but on pop culture in general is incredible. Luke Gygax says that he was recently shopping for a birthday card when he saw one that said "Happy Level-Up Day."

"That's a concept that my dad created for Dungeons & Dragons way back in the early '70s, and now it's just in the common parlance," he says. "This outcast was somehow able to come up with a complex structure that has brought billions of hours of joy and influenced our culture…I'm amazed that the more I dig, the more I see his fingerprints on things." ◆

MAPPING THE STORY

D&D has followed a winding road of remakes and revamps. These series entries and pop culture moments mark the roleplaying game's evolution.

BY COURTNEY MIFSUD INTREGLIA



A NEW GAME

Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson wrote a rule-book for Dungeons & Dragons, crafted on Gygax's home typewriter. After they scraped together $2,400 for start-up costs, Gygax and Don Kaye founded Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) in October.

START

1973

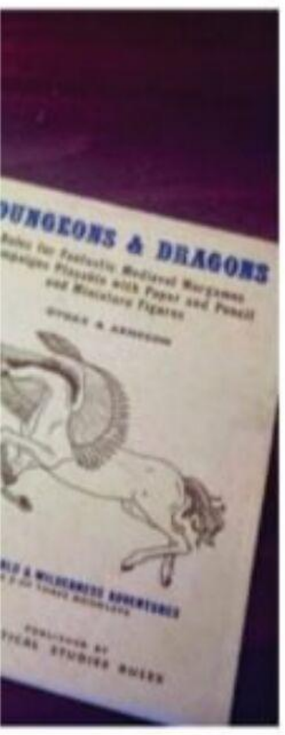
PSIONIC MINDS

Three D&D supplements were released: *Swords & Spells, Gods, Demi-Gods & Heroes,* and *Eldritch Wizardry.* The latter was the first sourcebook to feature the monstrous humanoid aberrations called illithids (commonly known as mind flayers).

ADVANCED PLAY

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons was published and served as an "advanced" and "definitive" version for players who had graduated from the basic set. The release was split into three books: the *Players Handbook,* the *Dungeon Masters Guide,* and the *Monster Manual.* This D&D pattern has stayed the same to this day.

1974 **1975** **1976** **1977** **1980**

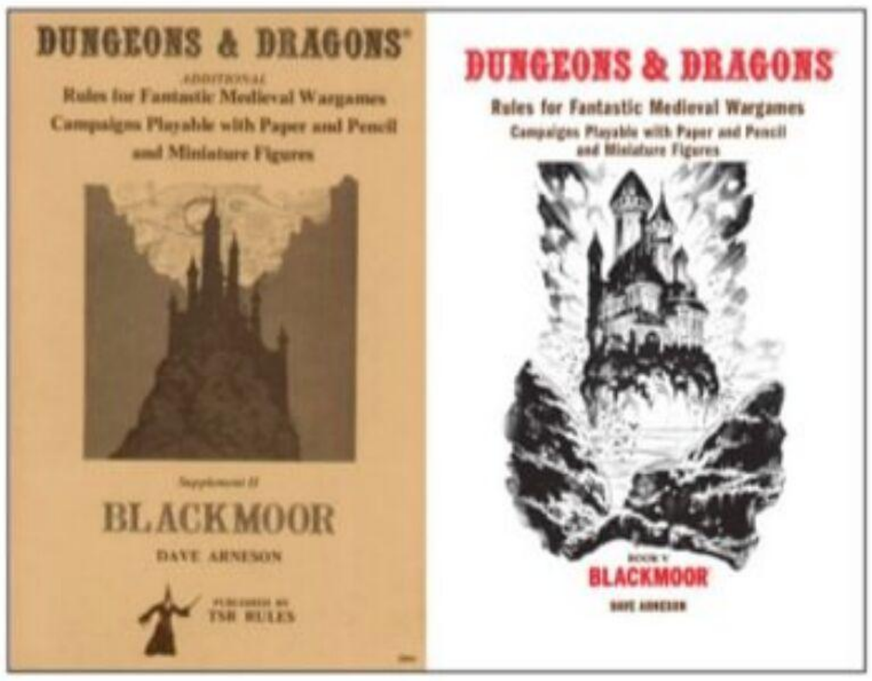


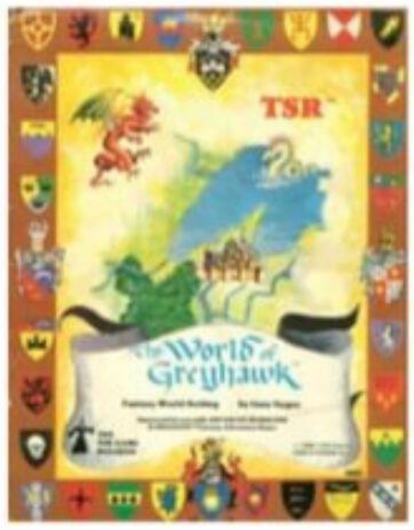
RELEASE DAY

TSR released original Dungeons and Dragons, or OD&D. There were three booklets, all written as if the player already knew how to play a similar game. The set introduced concepts that would become standard in later editions, including ability scores, armor class, and character classes. The first 1,000 hand-assembled copies sold quickly.

BLACKMOOR BOUND

TSR released Arneson's *Blackmoor,* a supplementary rulebook for the original edition of Dungeons & Dragons. The supplement added two character subclasses (Assassin, a thief subclass, and Monk, which was then a cleric subclass). *Blackmoor* also included *The Temple of the Frog,* the first-ever roleplaying game adventure for D&D.





A CANVAS FOR ROLEPLAY

The World of Greyhawk fantasy world setting was the original World of Greyhawk campaign-setting sourcebook, and the first published sourcebook to describe the campaign setting in detail. The release also included two large maps and a 32-page booklet that gave an overview of the setting.

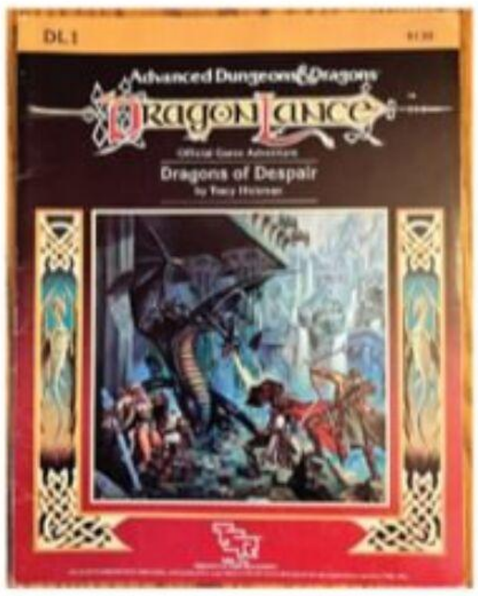
TEENS AND TOONS

The animated *Dungeons & Dragons* television show ran from 1983 to 1985. The series focused on six friends who were transported to the realms of D&D by way of an amusement park roller coaster. TSR would go on to release a board game and several comic books inspired by the cartoon.

SHIPS AND SORCERY

A year after the *Spelljammer* campaign setting was released, TSR put out the *Wildspace* adventure book and the *Monstrous Compendium Spelljammer Appendix,* which included fantasy outer-space creatures including the mechanical constructs clockwork horrors and the ten-legged Asteroid Spiders.

1983 | 1984 | 1985 | 1989 | 1990

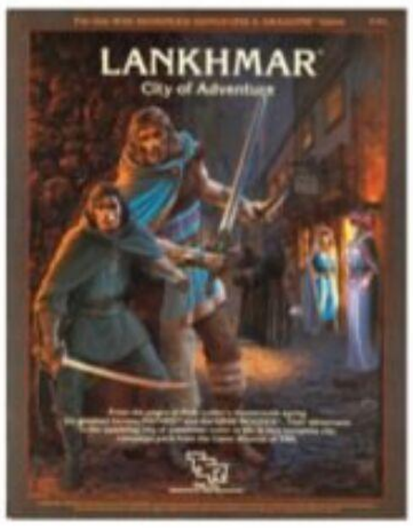


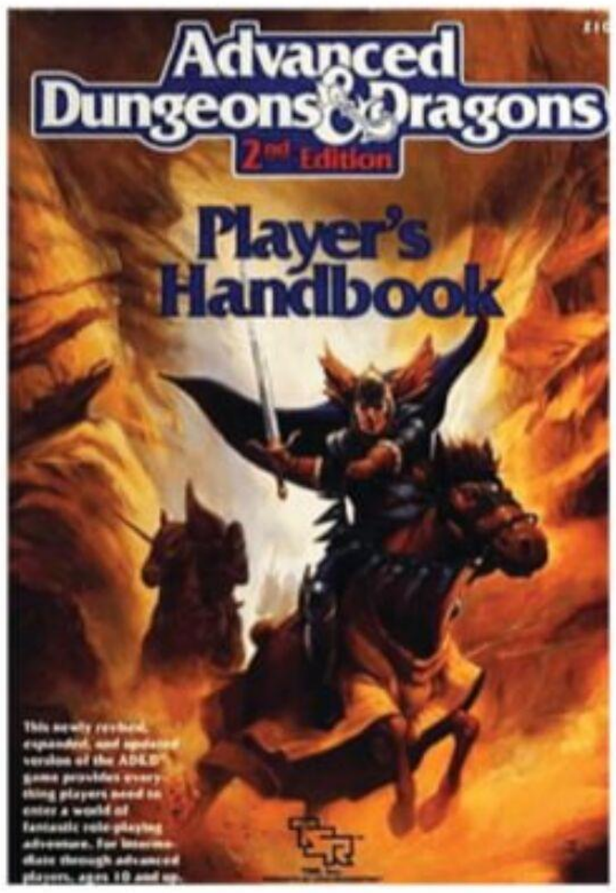
DRAGON'S DOOM

TSR published the first Dragonlance game module, *Dragons of Despair,* and the first Dragonlance novel, *Dragons of Autumn Twilight.* Dragonlances are weapons created for killing dragons during the Third Dragon War.

STATS AND CITIES

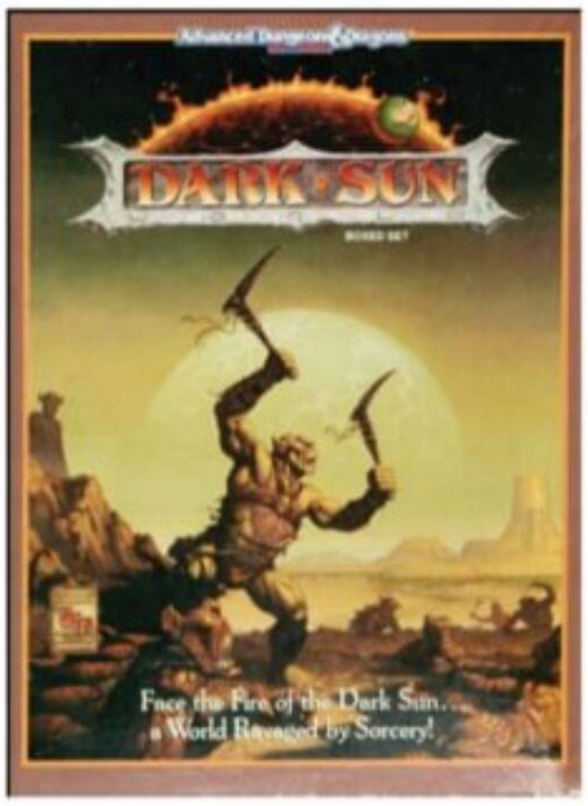
TSR released *Lankhmar: City of Adventure* as a supplement to AD&D. The text contained adventure ideas, descriptions of city areas, and statistics for promenent non-playable characters. *Lankhmar* was updated in 1993 for 2nd edition AD&D.





FIEND'S FOLLY

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons 2nd edition was published, featuring new rules and character classes. The release aligned with an effort by TSR to soften aspects of the game that had attracted negative publicity, most notably the removal of demons and devils, which were renamed tanar'ri and baatezu, respectively.

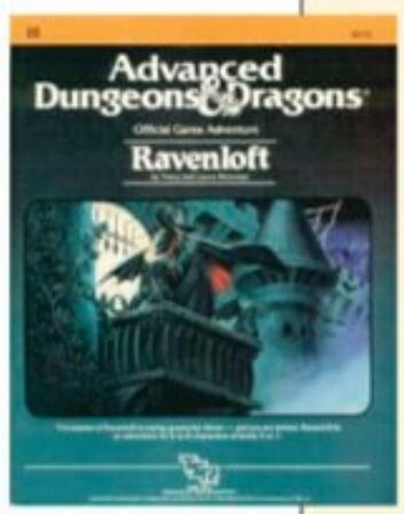


DESERT DANGERS

Wanting to release something different, TSR produced *Dark Sun,* a post-apocalyptic campaign setting where food and water were scarce. Resource management was a larger part of this campaign setting than in past worlds, and according to the game's designer, Rick Swan, the desert setting was a metaphor for struggle and despair.

HORROR AND TERROR

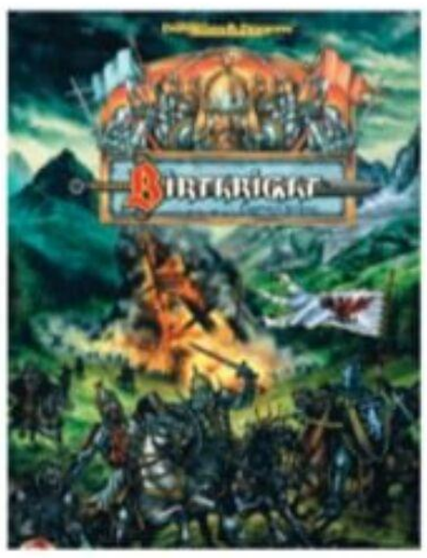
With gothic-inspired characters and vampire lore, the *Ravenloft* campaign setting existed in the pocket dimension Demiplane of Dread. Ten years after the sourcebook released, TSR published the adventure module *House of Strahd.* The vampire Strahd von Zarovich, who oversees his own domain of Barovia, is the best known of *Ravenloft*'s darklords.



1991 1992 1993 1994 1997

DUNGEONS & DINOSAURS

Developed for the Sega Genesis, *Dungeons & Dragons: Warriors of the Eternal Sun* used creatures and lore from the D&D *Hollow World* campaign setting, including dinosaurs and lizardmen. Set in the Land of Fate, the Al-Qadim campaign setting launched, using One Thousand and One Nights as a central theme.



PLANAR TRAVEL

The *Planescape* campaign setting explored realms including the Inner Planes of Air, Earth, Fire, and Water, and the Outer Planes, where gods and dieties reside. Characters can move from plane to plane using astral conduits or portals.

WIZARD'S WAY

Magic: The Gathering publisher Wizards of the Coast announced that it was purchasing TSR and its publishing rights. Wizards of the Coast also offered to relocate Wisconsin-based TSR employees to the West Coast.

Wizards OF THE COAST

AT THE GATE

Developed by BioWare, the first game in the *Baldur's Gate* series released on Microsoft Windows. The series takes place in D&D in the Forgotten Realms and focuses on a player-made character who adventures throughout the sword coast with a party of companions.

BEHOLDING BHAAL

The Monster Compendium: Monsters of Faerûn released for 3rd edition and detailed more than 80 monsters, including doppelgangers and gemstone golems. Two more Baldur's Gate entries released: *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* and *Baldur's Gate 2: Throne of Bhaal,* an expansion pack for the series sequel released in 2000.

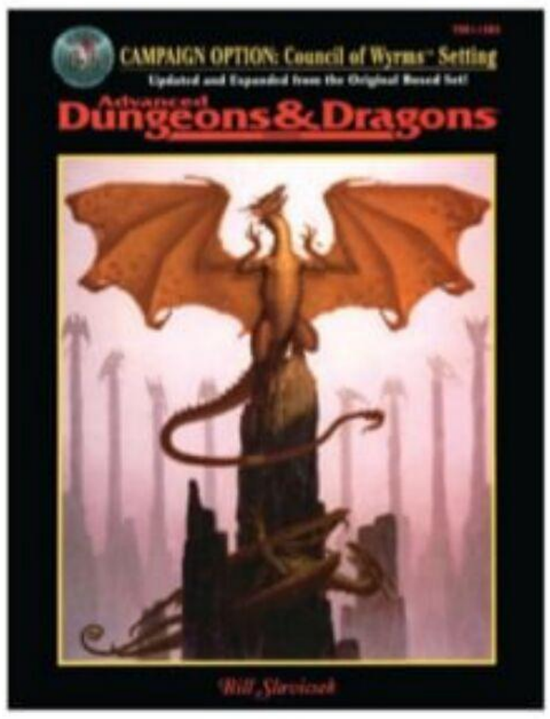
RULES REDO

Dungeons & Dragons version 3.5 released, including hundreds of rule changes and expanded core rulebooks. Despite the numerous changes, v.3.5 and 3rd edition (which was retroactively deemed D&D 3.0 by the community) remained largely compatible with each other.

1998 | **1999** | **2000** | **2001** | **2003**

DRAGONKIND

The 210-page sourcebook *Campaign Option: Council of Wyrms Setting* was released as a single-book option to mark TSR's 25th anniversary. This setting allowed players to create and roleplay as powerful dragons, complete with a series of adventures scaled to challenge the advanced player characters. *Baldur's Gate: Tales of the Sword Coast* was released.

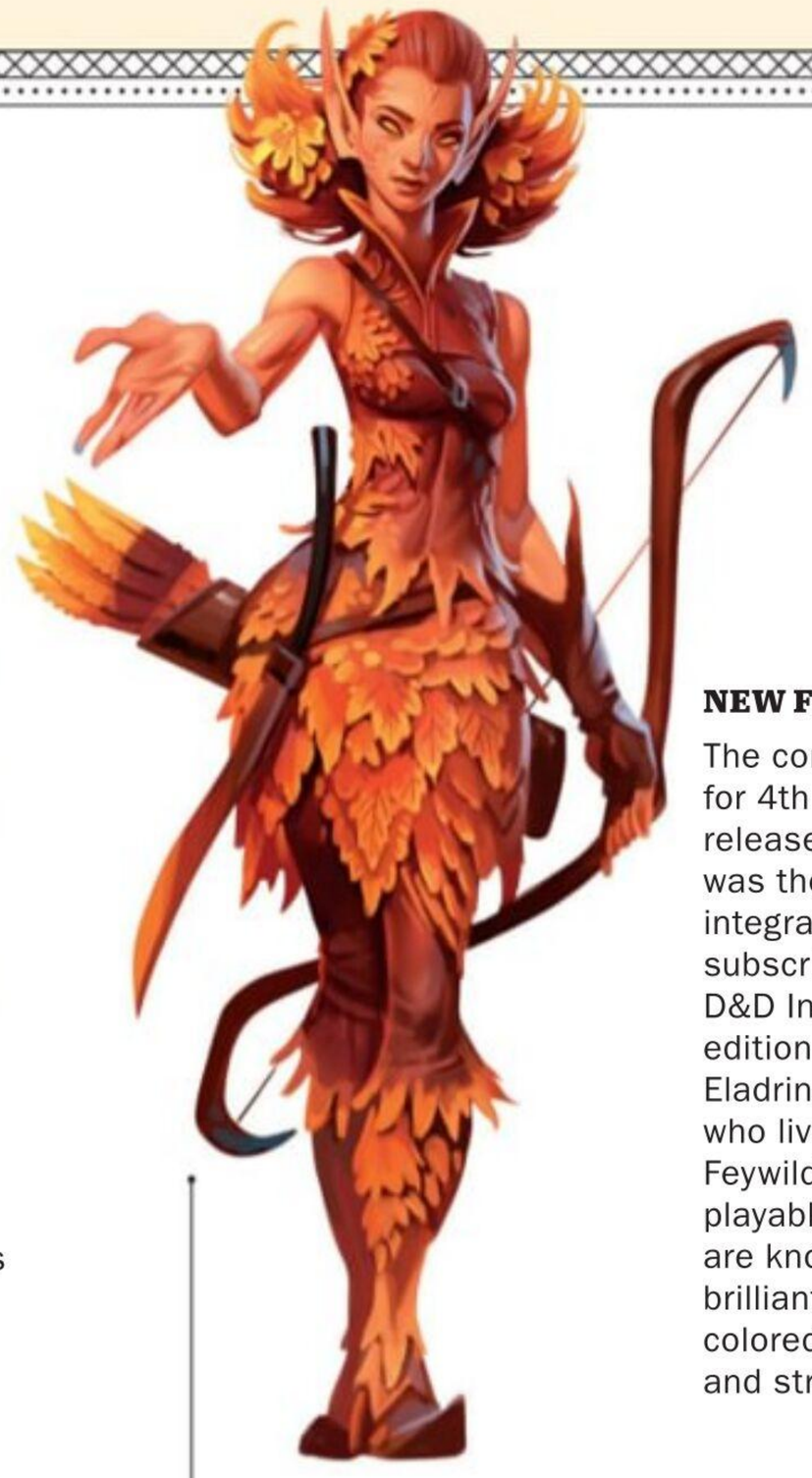


A BIG YEAR

The *Dungeons & Dragons* film was released (starring Jeremy Irons), as was Dungeons & Dragons 3rd edition; "Advanced" was removed from the name to avoid confusing new players. The 3rd edition introduced the D20 system, using the 20-sided die as primary decision maker. *Baldur's Gate 2: Shadows of Amn,* a sequel to the 1998 video game, was released. WoTC introduced the Open Gaming License, allowing third-party publishers to create D&D-compatible content.

A FLOPPED FLICK

Dungeons & Dragons: Wrath of the Dragon God, directed by Gerry Lively, released straight to video. The film served as a stand-alone sequel to the 2000 movie and featured Bruce Payne reprising his role as Damodar. IGN rated it a 3 out of 10, telling anyone looking for a meaningful Dungeons & Dragons experience to "just play the game."



NEW FEY FRIENDS

The core rulebooks for 4th edition were released. D&D 4e was the first to integrate a paid digital subscription service, D&D Insider. The 4th edition also introduced Eladrin, fey humanoids who lived in the Feywild, as a core playable race. Eladrin are known for having brilliant metallic-colored or white hair and striking eyes.

2004

NEW TECHNOLOGIES

A 320-page source-book introduced *Eberron,* a campaign setting that followed a destructive war. It included some nontraditional fantasy technologies, such as skyships and magic-powered mechanical beings. More than 20 supplements for the Eberron setting were released over the next four years.

2005

VILE DARKNESS

Director Lively attempted another film D&D adaptation, *Dungeons & Dragons 3: The Book of Vile Darkness,* which went direct to DVD in the U.K. and premiered in the U.S. as a Syfy Original Movie. Overhaul Games remastered the original *Baldur's Gate* game, combining it with its expansion *Tales of the Sword Coast.*

2008

MODERN EDITION

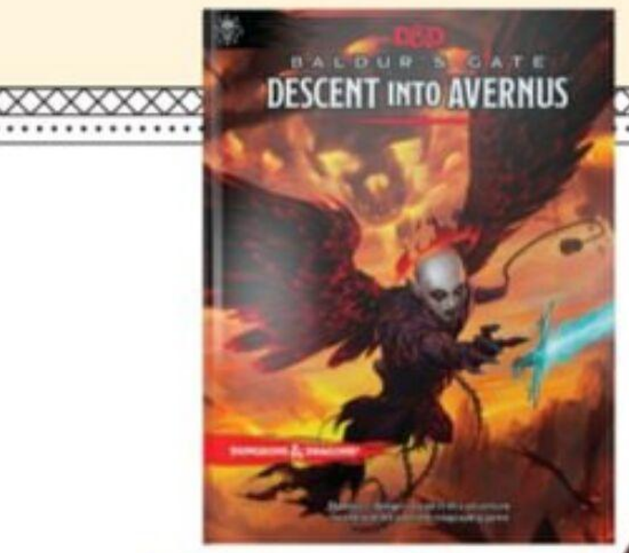
WoTC released Dungeons & Dragons 5th edition. The new release aimed to simplify the rules, making the game more accessible to all players. The first official release for D&D 5th edition was a 32-page Starter Set, followed by the Dungeons & Dragons 5th edition core rulebooks: *Player's Handbook, Monster Manual,* and *Dungeon Master's Guide.*

2012

2014

GIANTS IN THE SKY

Baldur's Gate: Siege of Dragonspear, an expasion to the enhanced edition, released across platforms. WotC released the supplemental sourcebook *Volo's Guide to Monsters* along with the adventure *Storm King's Thunder,* set in the Savage Frontier region of the Forgotten Realms.



CITY DESCENT

WotC released adventure module anthology *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* and business-oriented sourcebook *Acquisitions Incorporated,* along with *Baldur's Gate: Descent into Avernus.* The latter adventure entails descending into the first layer of the Nine Hells and includes an exploration of Baldur's Gate, the Forgotten Realms location and famous video game city.

2015 | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019**

SANDBOX SUNDERS

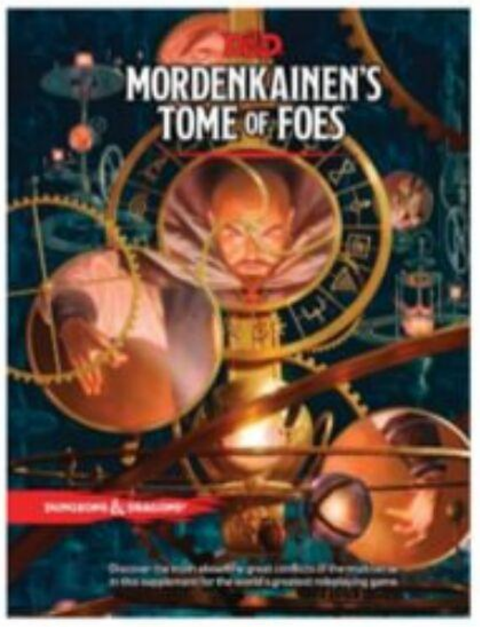
WoTC announced the new Elemental Evil storyline, which included the new adventure module *Princes of the Apocalypse.* Princes was celebrated as a "sandbox" adventure, meaning the world was dynamic enough for players to explore on their own, without much step-by-step by the Dungeon Master.

A DIGITAL REVOLUTION

WotC released adventure module *Tales from the Yawning Portal* and *Tomb of Annihilation,* as well as the sourcebook *Xanathar's Guide to Everything.* The company also released D&D Beyond after a months-long beta test. The online toolset supported 5th edition sourcebooks, which were available as a digital purchase through the platform. Purchased books, which included magic items and subclasses, allowed for integration into digitally accessible character sheets.

FINDING NEW FOES

WotC released *Guildmasters' Guide to Ravnica, Waterdeep Dungeon of the Mad Mage,* and *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes,* told from the perspective of Mordenkainen, a wizard from Gygax's *Greyhawk* setting. It adds new playable races, expands on creatures in the *Monster Manual,* and adds new ones.



WITCHLIGHT WONDERS

WotC released several sourcebooks, including *Strixhaven: A Curriculum of Chaos, Fizban's Treasury of Dragons,* and *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft,* along with adventure modules *Candlekeep Mysteries* and *The Wild Beyond the Witchlight.*

STRANGER VILLAIN

A variety of sourcebooks and adventures were released, including *Journeys through the Radiant Citadel, Critical Role: Call of the Netherdeep, Mordenkainen Presents: Monsters of the Multiverse, Dragonlance,* and *Spelljammer: Adventures in Space. Stranger Things* Season 4 introduced a new villain: Vecna, of D&D renown.

TIME FOR TAV

WotC released the adventure *Tyranny of Dragons* as two D&D-dominated screens. *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves* was released in theaters worldwide, and *Baldur's Gate 3* was released. Published by Lairan Studios, the new series entry won several awards as game of the year.

2020 | **2021** | **2022** | **2023** | **2024**

BAROVIAN BAD GUY

Several sourcebooks were released, including *Mythic Odysseys of Theros, Tasha's Cauldron of Everything,* and *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount,* which is set in Exandria, the *Critical Role* universe. The adventure *Icewind Dale: Rime of the Frostmaiden* was released, along with *Curse of Strahd Revamped,* which remade the classic vampiric villain.

LOOKING FORWARD

Celebrating the 50th anniversary of D&D, WotC released the new sourcebook *The Book of Many Things* and several adventures, including *Descent into the Lost Caverns of Tsojcanth* and *Vecna: Eve of Ruin.* Retooling the existing D&D 5th edition rules, Wizards released a new *Player's Handbook* and plans to roll out a new *Dungeon Master's Guide* and *Monster Manual.*

CHAPTER 2

D&D on Screen

While the game is all about players working together, some media mainstays encourage us to just sit back and watch.

Legendary D&D villain Vecna has made pop-culture appearances in Stranger Things *and* Critical Role.

The Titans of Tabletop

The most prolific voices in the tabletop roleplaying space share what it's like to bring their storytelling on stage.

BY COURTNEY MIFSUD INTREGLIA

I ENTER A BUZZING TAVERN, EAGER to partake in some drink and mingle with other patrons. On the way inside, a life-size mimic—with its menacing and toothy maw—is noticeable from across the room. Even with its monstrous denizens, the tavern is impeccably decorated with intricate wooden reliefs and carvings depicting dragon heads, owlbears, and battle axes. Along the ceiling's beams, sigils carved into the wood spell out TOMOROW'S STORY IS STILL UNWRITTEN in Thorasta, a language more largely known as "Common" on the continent of Faerûn. As I settle into my seat with a tankard of wine, I clock a tiefling wizard entering from behind me on the arm of a paladin in full regalia (minus the clanking platemail).

Despite the fantastical ambience, I'm not actually in Faerûn's Sword Coast, nor am I anywhere in the Forgotten Realms. I'm a few blocks away from New York City's Port Authority Bus Terminal at Stage 42 Theater, about to play Dungeons & Dragons with 500 new friends.

Dungeons & Dragons: The Twenty-Sided Tavern is an off-Broadway show in which seasoned story-

Dimension 20's *Intrepid Heroes, from top left: Lou Wilson, Ally Beardsley, Brian "Murph" Murphy, Zac Oyama, Siobhan Thompson, and Emily Axford; in front, Brennan Lee Mulligan.*

tellers and comedians interact with the audience to complete a largely improvised D&D session, complete with dice rolls, initiative orders, and a charismatic Dungeon Master trying to keep the story on the rails. The warm-hearted and silly spectacle has been covered by myriad mainstream outlets, including the *New York Times* and *Rolling Stone*.

As D&D has evolved from a fringe hobby into a mainstream medium, the idea of people watching others play the tabletop game instead of playing themselves has exploded on a similar track. Actual play—sometimes called live play—is a new genre of storytelling in which people play tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) for an audience, often through a podcast or an online streaming show. Much like with D&D itself, the original supporters of the genre were mega-fan tabletop devotees finding community in a niche medium. But over the past several years, it has exploded, with shows like *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20* becoming large-scale franchises with robust merchandise programs, selling out stadiums with the fervor of a Taylor Swift or Olivia Rodrigo concert.

The Twenty-Sided Tavern builds on the actual play genre's momentum, with improv comedians and dramatic storytellers crafting narratives that make you feel like you're rolling the dice yourself, even if you're not. But this show expands beyond the bounds of actual plays and involves the audience in crucial, pivotal story decisions from the second the guests take their seats. As the rows begin to fill, the three cast members, along with the Dungeon Master and co-creator David Andrew Greener Laws (who goes by DAGL), disperse into the audience and begin checking in with each group of viewers. While we wait for showtime, the cast seeks consent from individuals about whether or not they would like to be called on to participate on stage and hands out prompts for the audience to fill out. They also point out instructions in the showbill for accessing the browser-based voting software, designed by Gamiotics, that is key for the most interactive elements of the production.

On-screen depictions explain some basic Dungeon & Dragon concepts, like the Intelligence and Wisdom abilities: "Intelligence is knowing a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is knowing not to put a tomato in a fruit salad." For more experienced viewers, these previews also pepper in-world Easter eggs like excerpts from *Volo's Guide to Waterdeep,* hinting at information that's specific to the show's Forgotten Realm metropolis setting. "It's very important to us that your knowledge of D&D is not a barrier of entry here," DAGL tells me after the show. "We want everyone to come and have a good time, even if you only saw the movie and have never played, if you've just heard about it, or if you've been playing for 20 years."

Once the show begins, DAGL and the Tavern Keeper (Sarah Davis Reynolds, also a co-creator and story designer) continue to teach the audience how to play D&D—introducing key concepts and explaining what might happen depending on a given outcome—in a way that gives just enough information to newcomers without feeling exhaustive and stale to seasoned players. Although the audience has already met the cast ahead of showtime, DAGL formally introduces the three adventurers: a warrior (Tyler Nowell Felix), a mage (Madelyn Murphy), and a trickster (Diego F. Salinas). But the three comedians don't know who they're roleplaying yet: That's for the audience to determine for them. Through the Gamiotics voting system, we're given choices of different characters for each of the three main cast members to roleplay, from a shortlist pulled from 33 total characters designed for the show. On the Thursday night show I attended, our heroes were a dwarven supervillain, an undead cowboy, and a suspicious monk (who was really just two kids in a trench coat). Each character is allocated a third of the audience (who are selected at random by a handout in the production's playbill) to vote their key choices, lend support in pivotal moments, and turn the story's tide through button-mashing-style games and puzzles. "The thing that we were really looking for in this experience was, how does it feel when 500 people are playing together," DAGL says. "Your voice and your choice are integral to each night. Without you, we can't tell the story."

By the end of the show, my sides hurt from laughing and cheering. I was taken on stage by DAGL and Reynolds and given a peek at their "DJ booth," a station that controls the show's live elements. Here, the two creators have access to the various dice cameras,

Clockwise from above: A physical rendering of the shapechanging mimic in Stage 42's waiting area; Sarah Davis Reynolds and DAGL; Madelyn Murphy, DAGL, Tyler Nowell Felix, and Diego F. Salinas.

the on-screen health bars, and a variety of combat effects. DAGL then points me to a sprawling on-screen module with each decision and choice that the audience can make mapped out in a web of variables, successes, and failures. "We try to make the show as balanced as possible so that every decision not only has consequences—because every decision does have consequences—but every decision has equal weight and equal draw for the audience," he says. Reynolds adds, "If you come to the show three, five, or ten times, you're seeing something different every time."

IN THE WAKE OF THE CHAOS AFTER THE APOGEE Solstice, a group of brave heroes called the Mighty Nein join forces to deal with the rolling dangers suddenly unleashed. That was the promised premise when more than 12,000 fans gathered in London's Wembley Arena, a venue that has hosted Tina Turner, the Beatles, and Queen over the years. But this sold-out show is not a rock concert. On October 25, 2023, Wembley hosted a handful of self-proclaimed "nerdy-ass voice actors" who create and star in a Dungeons & Dragons show called *Critical Role*.

The Scottish comedian Daniel Sloss introduced Dungeon Master (DM) Matthew Mercer and his fellow *Critical Role* cast members, Ashley Johnson, Marisha Ray, Taliesin Jaffe, Travis Willingham, Sam Riegel, Laura Bailey, and Liam O'Brien. The crew were dressed up as versions of the characters they brought to life through 141 episodes of the show's second season and campaign (Riegel notably did not dress up as his character, instead donning a Freddie Mercury–inspired ensemble). The massive crowd sang along to the program's theme song and roared at every natural 20 dice roll. "Because we're all theater kids, there's a special kind of energy," says Mercer, who serves as the chief creative officer of Critical Role Productions and the DM of the program's three major campaigns. "There really is kind of a sharing of energy with everyone who's present, especially if they're all there and as excited for this as you are."

Whether on Twitch or YouTube (the show's primary outlets) or on a stadium's stage, Mercer weaves together rich narratives and expansive worldbuilding as he welcomes us into Exandria, the in-game *Critical Role* universe that he created and continues to showcase. The root of Mercer's tabletop storytelling goes back to his early high school days, when he was invited to join a game with some older classmates whom he admired. "I discovered that their version of playing the game wasn't quite the version that I was excited for," Mercer says. "I decided to Dungeon Master so I could create the game that I was excited to play with my friends, and that's how it's been ever since." Dungeons & Dragons became a creative outlet that Mercer was fully immersed in, where he could craft worlds that he was really proud of. "It served as a place for me to bond with my closest friends, to share experiences that made us closer and taught us all a little bit about each other," he says. "It was also a cornerstone to my modicum of a social life as an introverted nerdy kid in high school, and eventually it led to me opening up a little bit and becoming interested in the performing arts and learning that I enjoy acting."

The *Critical Role* cast is composed of voice actors, and many of them have earned accolades for their work. Mercer has lent his voice to scores of characters including Yusuke Kitagawa in video games *Persona 5 Royal* and *Persona 5 Strikers,* Captain Levi Ackerman in anime series *Attack on Titan,* and Cassidy in video game *Overwatch.*

It was on the set of the film *Resident Evil: Damnation,* while Mercer was recording the character

Leon S. Kennedy, that the *Critical Role* cast started to come together. Outside the recording booth, O'Brien, who was voice directing the project, told Mercer that he used to play D&D when he was a kid. Mercer shared that he had, too, but he never stopped, and O'Brien should join him for a game or two. "I had brand-new kids at that point, and I had no free time," O'Brien recalls. "I was like, 'That doesn't sound like it's for me, but I'm glad you're having fun with it.'"

A year or two later, O'Brien approached Mercer to take him up on the offer. They assembled a table of voice actor friends at the small apartment of Mercer and his partner, Marisha Ray, who is now the creative director at Critical Role Productions. "Matt brought me in, as well as Taliesin Jaffe, because we were both experienced D&D players and could help guide the newbies," Ray says. O'Brien brought in Riegel, Willingham, and Bailey for the first game; they had such a good time playing that Johnson joined for the second. Johnson told Felicia Day, the co-founder of Geek & Sundry, about their home game, which was halfway through a campaign. Then Day approached the group about playing it in a live-streamed format for Geek & Sundry's Twitch channel. They streamed their first episode in March 2015, picking up with the adventures of a party called Vox Machina.

According to O'Brien, the cast didn't think playing on camera would work—but they were wrong. Interest exploded during that initial campaign, and the group was getting popular enough that they had to form their own company. "So many stories you hear about how you don't go into business with your friends," says Mercer. "There's all these horror stories of that turning into lessons that everyone should look toward." In order to prioritize their friendships, the group had hard conversations early on to make sure everyone's opinion was respected and they were all on the same page. "We work together as a team to not only shepherd this to the best version it can be, but to not lose ourselves and our love for each other in the process," Mercer says.

While the *Critical Role* cast brings in-game moments to life, such as the team slaying an ancient red dragon at the end of a tiresome battle, the company has brought these adventures to life through another medium: television. "In the middle of campaign one, there were so many times that something would happen in a game and we'd be like, 'Damn, imagine how awesome this would be animated,'" Ray says. Amid their second campaign, on March 4, 2019, the *Critical Role* cast launched a Kickstarter campaign to raise funds for a 22-minute animation called *Critical Role: The Legend of Vox Machina Animated Special.* Within an hour of its launch, the Kickstarter had raised more than $1 million. At the end of the first full day, all of the announced stretch goals had been unlocked, and the total had reached more than $4.3 million. With such support, the project expanded into an R-rated animated series on Amazon called *The Legend of Vox Machina,* which chronicles the adventures from *Critical Role*'s first campaign. The show's third season arrives in October 2024, and a new show focusing on the second campaign's Mighty Nein has been announced.

I asked O'Brien how it felt to have his half-elf rogue/paladin/druid Vax'ildan come to life in this new medium. "Can you just put a sigh into print? To date, it's been the most rewarding moment of my creative life," he says. "This is the first time that we all got to make a story together. It's our story. I'm not facilitating someone else. We empowered ourselves."

ON THE ROAD TO COMIDA, THE CAPITAL CITY OF THE food-based world of Calorum, among the peppermint trees, a caravan of the nation of Candia's diplomatic envoy is ambushed, seemingly by Meatland brigands. The story that follows includes intense political subterfuge, villainous monologues, and heartwrenching character deaths. This is a story of six little candy people in a saga modeling *Game of Thrones.*

A Crown of Candy, which aired in 2020, is the sixth season of *Dimension 20* and its third campaign with the main cast, known as the Intrepid Heroes. Produced by Dropout, an independent comedy-based streaming service, *Dimension 20* features Game Master Brennan Lee Mulligan and a table full of comedians and pro gamers telling stories through Dungeons & Dragons. To date, the series has run 22 seasons, with themes ranging from John Hughes–meets–fantasy high school to a court of Regency-era archfey. In the coming months, *Dimension 20* will host a live show in New York City's massive Madison Square Garden, aptly named Gauntlet at the Garden.

Mulligan was introduced to tabletop roleplaying games by Elaine Lee, a celebrated playwright and writer, and the future Game Master's mom. Lee, who

The cast and creators of Critical Role, *with Matthew Mercer as Dungeon Master.*

authored the graphic novel series *Starstruck*, helped Mulligan find a gaming group and learn how to play. When he was 10, he started running the games for his friends, not unlike what he does now. "The first time I ran a game, after it ended, I told my mom this was the most stressful day of my life," Mulligan says. "And I went, 'Can we schedule the next one?'"

CollegeHumor launched the Dropout TV video platform. In order to be successful, they needed new original content. Mulligan was mulling over market research and had an idea. "What was Dropout looking for? Improvisational, unscripted long-form content," he says. "Actual play has the benefit of being similar in production mode to the kind of panel game shows we do. It's a single set because you're improvising through a fantastical narrative." By the time the first season of *Dimension 20* aired, the dominant actual play shows were either edited audio format podcasts or weekly live streams like *Critical Role,* which had chat-based interactions with viewers. Knowing that they were going to be a video-on-demand service, they didn't have any touchpoints for what success would look like. "If we are edited, we know that we lose chat, we lose the interactivity, and that feeling of 'Oh god, anything can happen.' How can we make up for that?" says Mulligan, recalling the dilemma and how leaning into the creative constraint delivered a production value hailed as second to none. "The editing is going to help you follow the storyline and keep things moving along. We're going to have amazing coverage of the battle sets and [production designer] Rick Perry's beautiful minis. In this model, we're going to lean into what editing allows you to do."

By the time Mulligan pitched *Dimension 20,* he had already been running games for five out of the six main Intrepid Heroes. Siobhan Thompson, Emily Axford, Zac Oyama, and Brian Murphy all had experience as improv comedians at CollegeHumor. Lou Wilson was not a CollegeHumor cast member but had significant experience performing and playing with Mulligan. The sixth member of the Intrepid Heroes, Ally Beardsley, had never played D&D before but learned the game on screen as Kristen Applebees in *Fantasy High, Dimension 20*'s first season. "I had heard of D&D growing up, but it was linked to some sort of satanic [idea] that my parents had," says Beardsley, who grew up in a very religious household, something that they channeled into the character Kristen.

After the first season, it was clear that Dropout had caught lightning in a bottle with these six players and Mulligan as DM, and the producers continued to lean into that group's exciting dynamic. "There's something magical about what happens when the seven of us are in a room together in which we just become more than the sum of our parts," Thompson says. "They make me much better, and I feel like I help them be better as well."

Above: Mulligan with the stars of Dungeons & Drag Queens, *Jujubee, Bob the Drag Queen, Alaska 5000, and Monét X Change. Opposite: The hand-painted minis of* Dimension 20: Neverafter.

Dimension 20 fluctuates between seasons that retain the main cast and seasons that include other gaming experts and comedians, and sometimes with Brennan at the table instead of DMing. One of the most infamous guest-focused seasons did not bring in anyone from the larger Dropout universe or any gamers in the space and became the perfect medium for teaching novice D&D players how to play. "I spent a good three years before getting hired at Dimension 20 making actual play, coming up with all different ways to deconstruct a script for a company so that they could teach D&D faster," says Carlos Luna, the show's series producer and co-executive producer. "I did not have on my bingo card that the best way to do it with the biggest audience and the most understanding at the table would be Drag Queens."

In 2023, *Dimension 20* released *Dungeons and Drag Queens,* a story that takes place in a macabre underworld and features the pinnacles of *RuPaul's Drag Race* royalty. With Mulligan in the Game Master seat, the show included four players: Alaska 5000 as Princess, Bob the Drag Queen as Gertrude, Jujubee as Twyla, and Monét X Change as Troyánn. "They are apex performers—not just in the world of drag, in the world of entertainment," Mulligan exclaims. "For them to say, 'I'm going to learn a weird math game on camera' is a level of confidence, vulnerability, intelligence, and bravery."

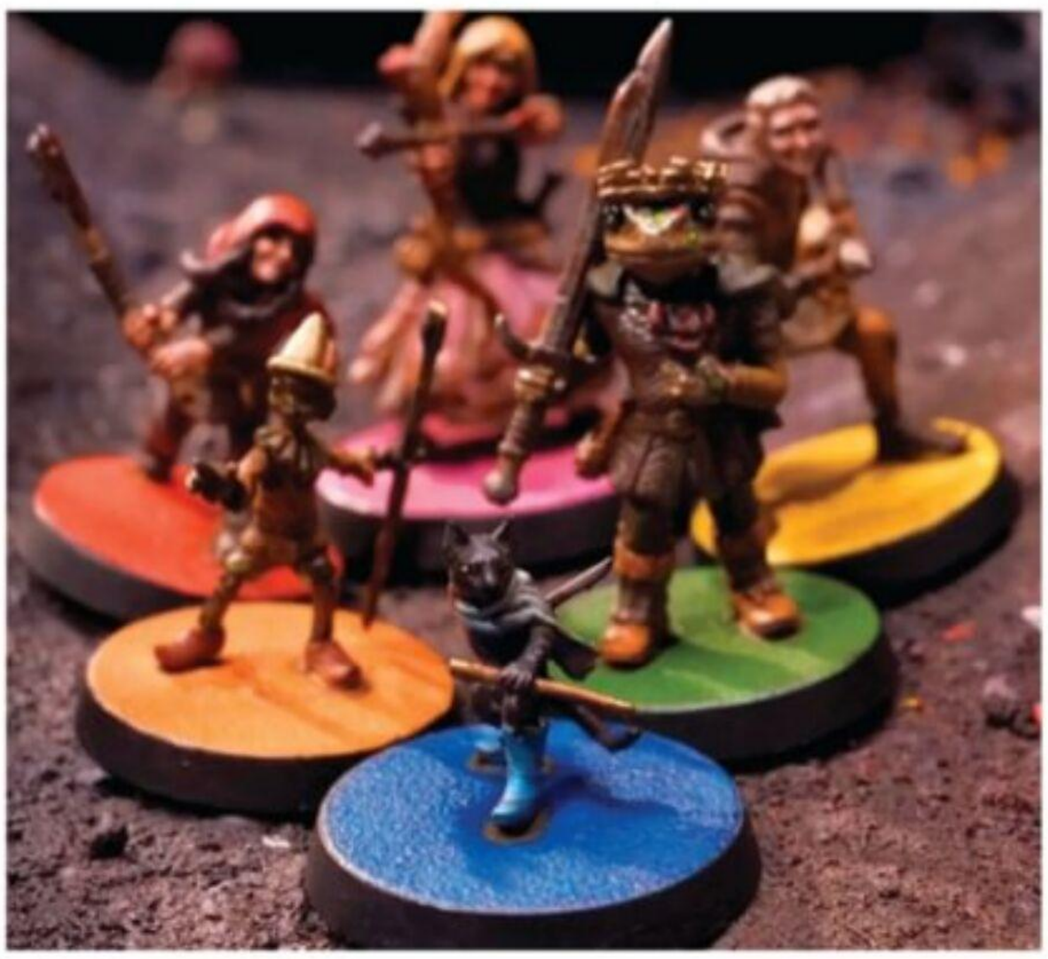
Dimension 20 and *Critical Role* are part of a larger community where the players collaborate and contribute to one another's programs. Mercer has DM'd The Ravening War, a prequel season to *Dimension 20*'s A Crown of Candy, and Mulligan has DM'd the *Critical Role* table for the apocalyptic *Exandria Unlimited: Calamity.* Many others in the space straddle these programs, such as Aabria Iyengar, who has DM'd the other *Exandria Unlimited* campaigns, along with multiple *Dimension 20* seasons. "So many people in this community have been friends since, well before the rise of live plays," Ray explains. "We all like each other, and we . . . have a love and a bond through this weird hobby that we've all dedicated so much of our lives to."

Stepping onto a different set to play or run the games can be a jarringly different experience. Battle maps in *Critical Role* are made in Mercer's map room with scores of premade minis and figurines, which allows him or another guest DM to put together an impromptu battle map in as little as 20 minutes. On the other hand, seasons of *Dimension 20*—with their expansive custom battle maps, immersive projections, and added props—have to begin production well before players ever sit down in the Dome. To make that happen, Rick Perry, the series' production designer, creative producer, and co-executive producer, sits down with each DM to discuss the world they're trying to build so that they can physically construct it well in advance. "We try to figure out as much as we can ahead of time, which is often a painful squeeze we put on the DMs," Perry explains. "With each DM, I have to figure out how to pick up whatever the melody is they're making there. Whatever it is, we start to jam together." Sometimes the DM's melody adds immense creative pressure to Perry's team, as with Iyengar's battle within the body of a giant bear, which she ran for the 2023 campaign, *Burrow's End.* Perry describes his team and the guests that they work with as compulsive overachievers. "We're all trying to one-up ourselves. We're trying to entertain ourselves and make each other laugh," he says. "We just keep opening new doors and stepping through."

The day that tickets went on sale for *Dimension 20*'s Madison Square Garden show, Luna hoped they'd be lucky enough to sell a few thousand. If they didn't, what would that mean for the program, and would this endeavor be considered worth it? "When we woke up in the morning, someone pinged us and said there were 20 or 30,000 people in the queue," Luna says. When Ticketmaster's dynamic ticket pricing system (which hikes up the cost in accordance with demand) kicked in, the average $150 to $200 ticket price soared to about $2,000. In a statement released on social media, *Dimension 20* apologized to fans and said the vast majority of tickets were purchased for $119. The company announced that they would be halting all dynamic pricing on this and future events and implemented a lottery system through which fans can score tickets for just $35—a similar system to Olivia Rodrigo's. "The idea that [the] love we have for telling stories together has brought us to this moment," *Dimension 20*'s Lou Wilson muses. "I feel incredibly lucky. I feel incredibly grateful. I don't think I'll be able to really understand the immensity of those feelings until I'm standing in Madison Square garden with 20,000 fans making a whole lot of noise."

The immense response to the live show speaks to the size of the actual play community and its belief that these performers will put on a show worth traveling to see. After having exploded in popularity nearly a decade ago, now, with *Critical Role,* actual play is a unique medium that can be transformed across genres. *The Twenty-Sided Tavern* is a live show that is performed multiple times, yet the story is different each time. "I think actual play is such a fun medium because it is living in that space of imagination," says *Dimension 20*'s Zac Oyama. So often, he says, a world doesn't translate well from book to movie, largely because what the reader imagined is not what gets presented. The actual play space is different. "Everyone is right in what they're imagining," Oyama says. "It can feel like weirdly real memories, even though you're describing a thing you did by rolling the dice and just acted out verbally."

When I asked both the *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20* teams what they thought of the immense scale that their programs have grown to, the consensus included terms like "flabbergasted" and "befuddlement." And even more so, these creators say they are immeasurably thankful to the fans and viewers who have engaged with their work. "Thanks to anybody who's followed our antics," Mercer says as we conclude our interview. "I'll spend the rest of my life trying to express my gratitude that anybody cared for our silly dice-rolling stories." ◆



OCTOBER 17, 2017

Stranger Things Stories

After its widely acclaimed first season, TIME visited the show's set in 2017 to discuss how it moves forward while channeling the nostalgia of the past.

BY DANIEL D'ADDARIO

EVERYONE'S TIRED ON THE SET OF *Stranger Things*. I'm visiting on a Friday in May, and a months-long, effects-heavy Season 2 shoot is grinding toward its end. "It's going slow," says Millie Bobby Brown, the 13-year-old Emmy nominee who plays the supernatural character Eleven. "Last season, it felt like we were rapid. Everything was fast," she says. But now, "the anticipation from the fans scares everyone. It makes the Duffers stressed. It makes us stressed."

The Duffers are Matt and Ross, identical 33-year-old twins and the maestros of a show that was about the only thing everyone seemed able to agree on during the contentious summer of 2016. The Netflix series, whose eight-episode first season arrived with relatively little fanfare that July, was set in 1983 and told the story of a group of young Dungeons & Dragons–playing friends who encounter interdimensional forces. As they look for their missing friend Will (Noah Schnapp), they befriend a mysteriously powerful preteen girl (Brown). Will's mother (Winona Ryder) unravels as she searches for him with the help of a hard-living cop (David Harbour). And Will's loner older brother (Charlie Heaton) warily teams up with other teenagers in their small town of Hawkins, Indiana, to find him.

But what made the show addictive was its clever and lovingly detailed packaging, from wood-paneled rec rooms and Schlitz-fueled teen keggers to a soundtrack of Toto and the Clash. References underpinned the story at every level. The show didn't just use Ryder, the queen of 1980s teen cinema, in a comeback role. It also brilliantly employed the visual language of John Hughes and Steven Spielberg, as well as the sinister yet comforting narratives of Stephen King. *Stranger Things* added up to something that not only felt like it came out of the '80s but also let you relive the decade—even if you weren't there the first time around. All in one bingeable package.

Stranger Things also became a huge hit. While Netflix does not release viewership numbers, the

Details from the Stranger Things *set show the creators' dedication to keeping viewers immersed in the 1980s.*

show made an obvious impact. Last Halloween, you might have noticed more than a few kids, and grown-ups, dressed as Eleven, or wrapped in Christmas lights to look like Ryder's character, Joyce, at her most forlorn. The *Stranger Things* kids became fixtures at awards shows, on late-night TV, and on magazine covers. Hollywood took notice, too, honoring the show with 18 Emmy nominations and the top prize at the Screen Actors Guild Awards. "To see Meryl Streep standing up and clapping for us was so weird. I never really thought it would happen," says Brown.

If *Stranger Things* now seems like a predestined success, it was a fairly edgy bet even by Netflix standards. After all, the show's creators were as green as they come. The Duffers had fairly thin résumés—a little-seen horror film released in 2015, a writing gig on a short-lived M. Night Shyamalan TV show—when they put together their pitch. It consisted of a book of images and a mock trailer summing up what their show would be. "It was super nuts," says Matt. "Sometimes I'll ask them point-blank why they let us do it at all."

In action, the Duffers tend to move in tandem. When the scene I'm watching them film ends, one brother bolts to advise the actors, and the other is up and following before anybody can even parse which one called "Cut." Both wear T-shirts, jeans, and the sort of retro sneakers that look like what you might've worn to high-school gym class in 1984. Between takes, the kids gleefully goof off. Their acting is jazzy and improvisational as they're encouraged to amp up their terror take after take. The Duffers' parents are visiting the set today, watching the action with headphones on from behind their director sons.

Matt and Ross Duffer grew up in Durham, North Carolina, where, Matt says, "it was hard to get or even hear about more obscure films." Instead, they

From left: Finn Wolfhard, Millie Bobby Brown, Caleb McLaughlin, and David Harbour in 2017.

went to the video store and rented the sort of crowd-pleasing, all-ages movies Hollywood doesn't really make anymore. The Duffers claim that their influences are more tonal than specific, that they draw upon the cinema of the past for mood more than detail. "We honestly weren't thinking about the references as much," says Ross. "We'd do a few winks, and of course we talked about *E.T.* when we first came up with this show, but that wasn't the primary focus. Let's just tell the best story we can, and hopefully we'll capture some of the magic of these movies we loved growing up."

There's something about those references that's essential to *Stranger Things*' resonance. They've turned into an internet parlor game among fans, who hunt out specific shots that might tie the show to its adventure-film heritage, for example. And despite the Duffers' protestations, it's easy to get them talking about specific sequences that are meant as homage. One scene I observed featured Max (Sadie Sink), driving a car with a block under her foot to reach the gas pedal. "That's exactly like Short Round in *Temple of Doom*," Ross says, referring to Jonathan Ke Quan's character in the second Indiana Jones film, which was released in the year when *Stranger Things'* second season is set. "Spielberg has an identical shot. The whole scene is informed by something else—and then let's do one wink for the fans."

The Duffers are a very specific sort of fan: slightly too young to remember the material they're quoting firsthand. They were too young to see *E.T.* in the theater, for instance, but they were able to watch—

and pause, and rewind, and restart—the VHS tape endlessly at home.

The show's first season seemed to wrap up Will's journey out of captivity, only to suggest that he came back more haunted than his buddies might realize. The ending seemed to promise deeper excavation into what the show's characters call "the Upside Down," the netherworld within or beneath Hawkins, with new kids and a new commitment to figuring out what exactly happened and is still happening in the paranormal town. "This year, in terms of scope and size, it's much closer to what we've always wanted the show to be," says Matt. The Duffers say this sequel moves the plot forward while keeping the signatures of the series. Among those signatures are, of course, the interplay between the kids—which is up against a ticking clock of sorts. As Matt puts it, "Our kids are growing, and we have to get the show out, whether it's a compromise or not."

Among the biggest expectations for Season 2 is that it comes out before the show's young stars get much older. Working with children plainly has its challenges. "They're a pain in the ass! I love them, but [by law] you can only work with them for a certain number of hours," Matt tells me. We're having a somewhat rushed conversation during a lunch break between shoots for a scene that includes most of the kids. "They're going to get yanked away from us at 7, even though we're not going to be done with them," he adds.

Stranger Things isn't just about the kids. In the first season, Ryder delivered perhaps her best on-screen work since her Oscar-nominated performance in Martin Scorsese's 1993 film *The Age of Innocence.* As Joyce, she frantically searched for a son everybody said was dead but whose presence she could feel bleeding through the walls of her house. Harbour, a Tony-nominated character actor who had appeared in the James Bond franchise, brought soulful fatigue to the role of Jim Hopper, the alcoholic town police chief. Both actors tapped into undercurrents of pain and exhaustion. Ryder was nominated for a Golden Globe, Harbour for an Emmy.

Rolling a cigarette in his set trailer, Harbour calls working with the Duffers "the greatest cinematic creative collaboration I've ever had." The differences between a Broadway-trained thespian and a pair of Blockbuster Video–trained directors have been fruitful for both parties. "I'm much more intellectual and much more academic in my process. I'll always push for more explanation," Harbour says. "And they'll always be like, 'Well, this is just kind of cool.' They're coming at it from an intuitive place. I consider them one being. They share one mind—it's just twice as big as mine!"

As for working with children, Harbour has had to push himself yet further. "I've never had to work with kids before in this capacity. There are pleasures to it, and there are also things that are difficult," he says. "When something's good, the relationships that we develop with lead actors, it's kind of a f---ed-up process. To do that with a 13-year-old child feels tricky. So, like, you know, on the surface, it's all cute, and everybody loves it. But underneath, there's a real complexity to it."

Brown came at her role pretty straight, as child actors tend to do. "Eleven is part of me and always will be. I don't try with her," she says. "I don't even know my lines for today's scene. So it's like, I don't know what I'm doing, and that's what makes it so instinctual."

Harbour is right about one thing: It is really cute, and everybody does love it. On set, the kids are both full of capering zest and possessed of that sort of big-kid poise that develops in your early teens. There's a lot of downtime between takes that adults might spend reading, knitting, or staring, bored, into a phone. But the kids have no trouble keeping busy. Caleb McLaughlin, who plays the cautious Lucas, introduces himself to the Duffers' parents by telling them with some gravity, "I'm fans of you guys as well." Later on, he and Finn Wolfhard, who plays Mike, the heart of his friend group, kill time between takes by singing Bon Jovi into a fan held by castmate Joe Keery. The whirling of the fan's blades distorts the sound so that the words—"Ohhhhhh, we're haaaaalfwaaaaay theeeeere"—come out like an on-the-fritz kitchen appliance. Keery plays Steve, Hawkins' high school stud. At 25, he should know better, and charmingly doesn't, than to encourage them.

They seem like a tribe, in other words. For Wolfhard, who also starred in this year's blockbuster remake of Stephen King's *It,* being on set is an escape from class. "School was difficult for me, elementary school especially," he says. "That was a hard battle. I was getting bullied a lot." For Gaten Matarazzo, finding roles became hard as he got older. He has the disorder known as cleidocranial dysostosis, which

Ross and Matt Duffer, the creators of the series, on set in Atlanta in 2017. D&D has been one of their biggest inspirations for the world of Stranger Things.

affects the bones and teeth. His *Stranger Things* character, Dustin, has it too. Matarazzo casually pops out his front dentures as he tells me, "I still have a lisp, even when I take my teeth out. I was never picked for voice-overs or for commercials. I was going out and they said I was good, but I was too short, too toothless." Now Matarazzo is on a show whose entire cast seems, in one way or another, to have found the perfect fit.

That Hollywood is bereft of new ideas these days is hardly a secret. Sequels outpace original properties on executives' to-do lists. But what really resonates with viewers isn't just iteration but a sense that the language of the past is being given a new phrasing. *It,* for instance, freshened up a widely known horror story with vivid effects and a slight attitudinal spin while still revering the source material. This year's *Beauty and the Beast* overlaid Gothic glam atop a fresh take on Disney's older tale. Both are among the most successful films in their respective genres ever made. Netflix's successes include revamps of past hits like *Full House, One Day at a Time,* and *Gilmore Girls.* Each updated the story for contemporary audiences while keeping a nostalgic core of friendship and family intact.

Part of what makes *Stranger Things* special is that it has tapped into our culture's fervent need to escape into the past. It subtracted smartphones and helicopter parents and added the sort of mortal peril that any good '80s thriller depends upon. And for all its winks, the show is an irony-free zone. "It's not nasty or mean or condescending or ironic, or any of those things," Matt says, "which a lot of content can be right now." He punches the word "content," a euphemism for art-as-product. "Because there's just so much of that. And there's a lot of shows about protagonists doing really nasty things to other people."

As a result, our own prosaic universe came to feel cinematic. More than ever, we want to escape into what's remembered, the pleasures and pains of growing up and the pop culture that accompanied us along the way. The Duffers have found a novel formula that does that by balancing homage and kitsch to create something entirely new.

Plus, the kids, whether you relate to them or to their parents, are on one hell of an adventure. "As we grow up," Wolfhard tells me at one point on set, "the characters grow up with us. For now, we've trademarked them. Until they remake it in 20 years. Or make a spin-off." ◆

Who Is Vecna?

The sinister villain of *Stranger Things'* fourth season has a storied history within D&D's Forgotten Realms.

BY JAMES GREBEY

THERE WAS A NEW BIG BAD LURKING in the Upside Down in Season 4 of *Stranger Things*. As with the series' previous villains—remember the Demogorgon and the Mind Flayer?—the evil force that Eleven and the gang have to face this year takes its name from a classic Dungeons & Dragons monster. A being known as Vecna threatens Hawkins, Indiana, just as Vecna the evil archlich threatened D&D players for decades.

While *Stranger Things* villains are not exact copies of the D&D monsters they take inspiration from, the characters on the show are avid players of the iconic tabletop game, as were the series' creators, the Duffer Brothers. As a result, there are several parallels between D&D and *Stranger Things,* not least including Season 4's addition of Vecna. Here's what you need to know about the fourth season's terrifying monster, a wizard turned lich who became the greatest D&D villain of all time.

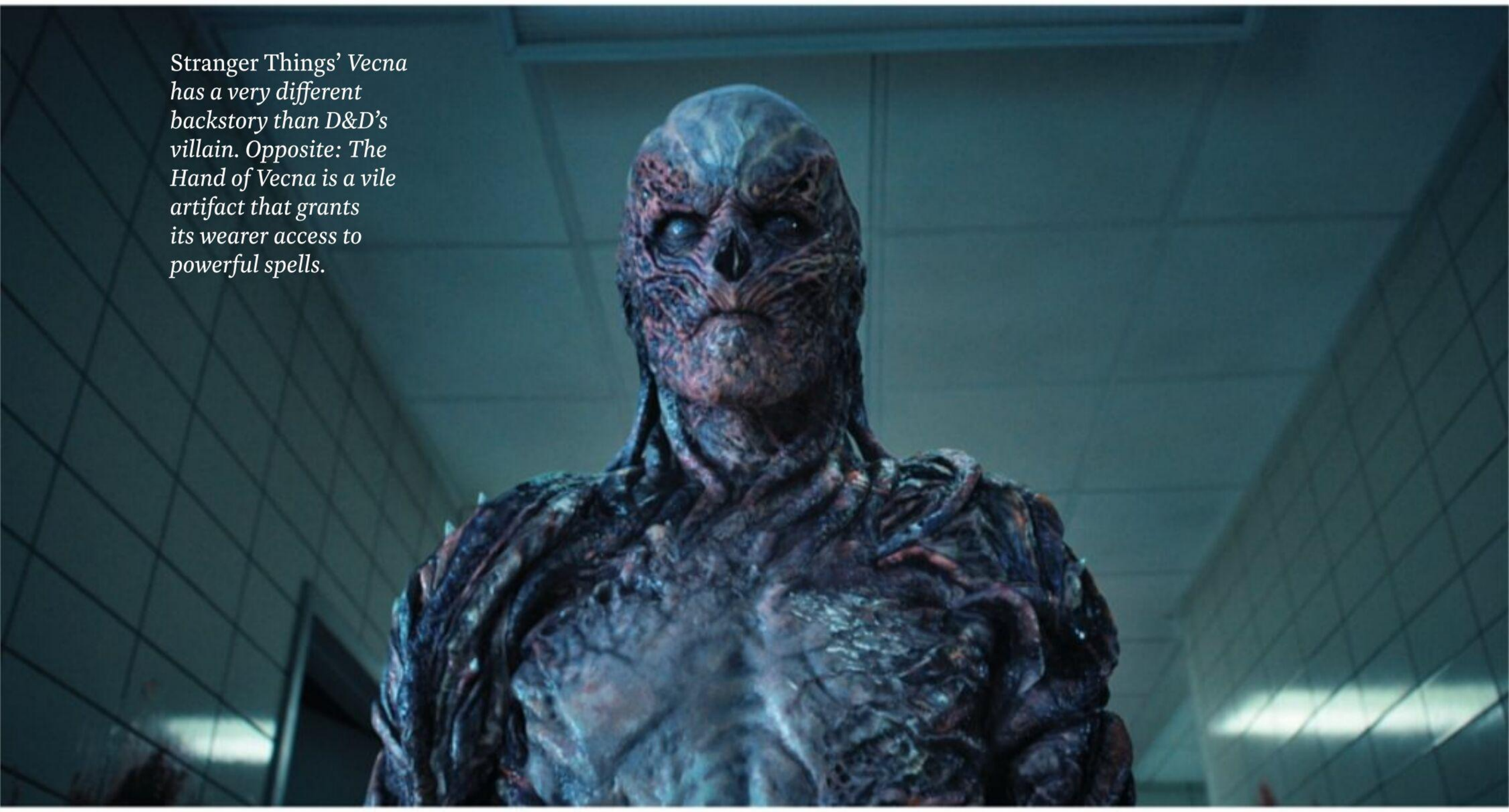
WHO IS VECNA?

Vecna, a being from the earliest days of D&D lore, was not a fully formed character when he made his debut in the The White Box, the very first version of D&D that creators Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson released in 1974, according to Chris Perkins, game design architect at D&D. That's in part because the original game had "a very crude presentation," rather than the detailed lore D&D has today, and in part because, initially, Vecna was just that: parts.

"Vecna was this enigmatic figure originally. We didn't know much about him, other than something happened and this powerful wizard became an undead wizard and then was destroyed, leaving behind an eyeball and a left hand," Perkins says. "Those were great artifacts of power in early D&D."

Vecna became a legendary figure whose remains were powerful items that Dungeon Masters (DMs) could use as rewards for their players. In order to use Vecna's Hand or Eye, players would need to

As a lich-god, Vecna has access to devastating spells and rituals that could plunge the multiverse into ruin.



Stranger Things' *Vecna has a very different backstory than D&D's villain. Opposite: The Hand of Vecna is a vile artifact that grants its wearer access to powerful spells.*

have their character carve out their own eye or lop off their own arm.

From the beginning, Vecna was a long-vanquished lich—a wizard who used dark forbidden magic to keep himself effectively immortal but in a perpetual state of undead decay—and while DMs were free to use their imagination and flesh him out into a proper villain, his only official existence in the old D&D books was as two magic items made from remains of his body.

But the release of the game's second edition in 1989 saw Vecna get more character development. DMs could now have their players interact with or fight in adventures with thrilling names like Die Vecna Die! Gradually, a theme emerged: This once-human being would employ dark powers in his quest for more knowledge and power, eventually ascending to godhood—and beyond.

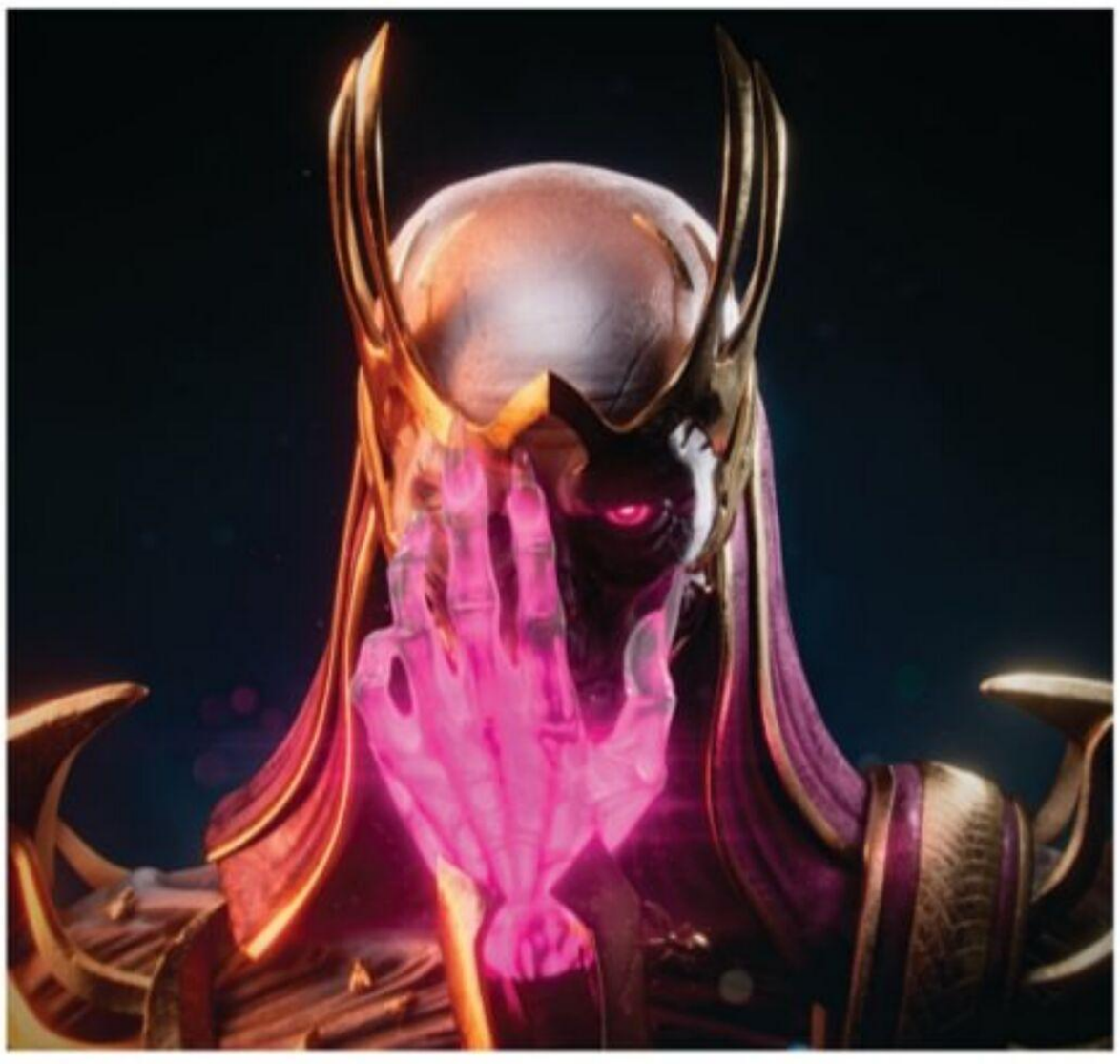
"He was a mortal, [but] he's always looking for the next big thing," Perkins says. "Godhood was sort of his quest for a long, long time. When he finally achieved it with fourth edition, that probably didn't satisfy him. Now he wants to be the greatest of the gods, eliminate all rivals, and learn the secrets of the multiverse itself."

In 2024, D&D released the adventure Vecna: Eve of Ruin, in which the titular villain tries to become the most powerful being in the multiverse.

HOW VECNA FITS INTO *STRANGER THINGS*

The *Stranger Things* kids would not be familiar with this more fully formed Vecna, as the latest season is set in 1986, prior to the release of the books that expanded his backstory. Given that so much of D&D relies on the Dungeon Master making things up, it's not by any means a plot hole that the *Stranger Things* kids would be familiar enough with the lich behind the artifacts to name their latest Upside Down foe after him. And, seeing as the Duffer Brothers certainly kept up with D&D, it seems reasonable that Vecna's post-'80s history might have influenced his depiction in the show.

D&D has been a part of *Stranger Things* from the start. The series begins with four friends playing a game that had their party of characters face off against a classic D&D foe named Demogorgon.



When Will Byers goes missing and a monster from the Upside Down haunts them, the kids name the beast after the most dangerous, evil monster they know: the Demogorgon from their D&D campaign. In Season 2, they continue this naming convention by giving the Upside Down's big bad the name of another iconic D&D villain: the Mind Flayer. Throughout the seasons, the kids have continued to play D&D, and Season 4 also features a plotline involving the real-life moral panic over Dungeons & Dragons, metal music, and other supposedly satanic pop culture that ran amok in the '80s. (However, Perkins says there wasn't really a specific connection to Vecna and this misguided satanic panic, because the lich was more of an enigma compared with the actual devils and demons in the pages of the Monster Manual.)

Netflix revealed very few details about Vecna's inclusion in *Stranger Things* Season 4 beyond the name and a glimpse of the monster, who looks much more human than the Demogorgon or the Mind Flayer. While not an exact match of Vecna as he's been portrayed in D&D over the years, there's a skeletal, undead, lich-like look to the *Stranger Things* version. Picture a tentacle-covered Freddy Krueger and you're not too far off.

We won't spoil exactly what the deal is with *Stranger Things'* Vecna, but we will say that he shares more than just a name with the D&D version. Vecna's exact depiction in D&D differs over the various editions, and each individual table of players in the improv-heavy game can be wildly different, but if there's a core to Vecna, it's this: He had humble beginnings, searched for more knowledge, and eventually ascended to new levels of power using dubious means at the expense of his own humanity. There are certainly echoes of this in his Upside Down counterpart.

"There is a cold calculation to Vecna," Perkins says. "I think we don't ever dig down into layers of psyche that would reveal anything other than that. He's always deliberately sort of cast as an enigmatic or shadowy or mysterious figure whose true motives tend to be inscrutable, but I think whenever he's shown up, he's been cold and calculating."

Prior to the release of the season, Perkins didn't know how much *Stranger Things'* Vecna would or would not be like the D&D baddie. He explains that Netflix reached out to Wizards of the Coast, and that D&D's franchise team worked with them to help provide inspiration and answer any questions. As part of this, the franchise team commissioned new concept art for Vecna and put a story guide together to give to Netflix to use or not. In other words, the Duffer Brothers had access to Vecna's D&D lore, so it was up to them how much of it they wanted to use.

Regardless of the fidelity of *Stranger Things'* Vecna, it's clear why the show would want to borrow his name, because Perkins counts him as one of D&D's most iconic villains, one who has endured through all the many editions of the game. "If I were to make a list of my top three villains, it would probably be Vecna, who is the iconic lich; Strahd, who is the iconic vampire; and probably Demogorgon, who is the iconic demon lord," he says.

With one season to go, there's a chance that *Stranger Things* could borrow another D&D monster's name for the next bad guy. Perkins—who has no insider information—says he's fond of Lolth, the Demon Queen of Spiders, but that he personally wouldn't mind seeing Orcus, a demon lord and master of the undead, make his way to the show. "He's got a connection to Vecna that few people know because, as the Prince of Undeath, Orcus holds the secret to lichdom," Perkins says. "He basically gives it out to powerful wizards who pay deference to him or honor him in some way. So it's possible that Vecna actually pried the secrets of lichdom from Orcus." ◆

Chris Pine, center, leads a fantasy troupe comprised of familiar and accurate character classes.

Thieves Making Magic

The secrets from the set of 2023's *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves* involve monsters, mayhem, and K-Y Jelly.

BY NICK ROMANO

In the film, the players are able to overcome a gelatinous cube. While it may look like Jell-O, it is a living and breathing creature that has bested many real-life D&D parties.

HUGH GRANT WANTS HIS *DUNGEONS & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves* costar Chris Pine to talk about the onions in the movie. Pine isn't paying attention. Sitting with his fellow actors for *EW*'s latest edition of Around the Table, the star, who plays a bard by the name of Edgin in the movie, is listing some of the familiar creatures players of the popular roleplaying game can expect to see on screen.

He mentions owlbears, mimics, gelatinous cubes, and even makes a nod to the '80s D&D television show—but no onions.

"Onions?" asks Justice Smith, who plays the sorcerer Simon.

"What are the things you leave in the film? … Clues," Grant says.

Smith and Michelle Rodriguez say it together as they burst into laughter during Pine's response: "Easter eggs!"

The main players of the D&D film have clearly bonded off-screen, which reflects what audiences will get on-screen when seeing *Honor Among Thieves* in theaters—in short, easy camaraderie and plenty of hijinks.

In the film, Pine's Edgin and his barbarian bestie Holga (Rodriguez) bust out of prison after serving years for a dungeon heist gone wrong, setting them on a cross-country quest to reunite with Edgin's daughter, Kira (Chloe Coleman). Along the way, they link up with a motley crew of misfits, including Grant's Forge, an old acquaintance of the crew who swindled his way into becoming the Lord of Neverwinter. There's also Sophia Lillis' Doric, an eco-warrior druid, and Regé-Jean Page's Xenk, a paladin who does not traffic in colloquialisms.

And then there's the K-Y Jelly, which the cast say played a big part in bringing this movie to life. Page points to a scene involving a fish that had swallowed a baby tabaxi (a species of catlike humanoids). "To make it appear as slimy as it was, it was covered in K-Y Jelly," the actor says.

The others had their own run-ins with the lube brand. "All of us were covered in K-Y Jelly at one point," Smith notes.

"Gelatinous cube day!" Rodriguez adds.

PULLING OFF A WILD SHAPE ESCAPE

Among the first ideas that came to directors John Francis Daley and Jonathan Goldstein when conceiving *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves*, before they even pitched Paramount, was a sequence involving Doric, a druid now played by Lillis, with the shape-shifting ability known as Wild Shape.

The filmmakers previously tried their hand at a tracking shot (one single, uninterrupted take) with their previous movie, *Game Night*. The camera followed Jason Bateman, Rachel McAdams, and Sharon Horgan as they played a high-stakes round of keep-away with one coveted Fabergé egg. With D&D, the duo wanted to one-up themselves.

"It's such a fun and immersive way to tell a story within the context of a scene, as long as it's justified," Daley tells *EW* in an interview with Goldstein. "Being chased and following the character as it goes from different animals that suit its physical environments just felt like a really delicious way to portray a chase scene."

In his pursuit to reunite with his daughter and steal the riches from a backstabbing old cohort, the bard Edgin needs the services of a druid, a nature-loving spell-caster with the power of Wild Shape, which allows them to transform into various animals. That's where Doric comes in.

Sneaking into the Neverwinter castle as a fly, Doric spies on Forge in the hopes of finding where he's going to be storing all the winnings from an upcoming tournament. The devious red wizard Sofina (Daisy Head) sniffs her out, forcing Doric to transform in and out of various animal shapes in order to escape the castle with her life. The final cut makes it look like one continuous shot as Doric switches between a mouse, a hawk, a cat, a certain bird creature, and, finally, a deer. Of course, visual effects sorcery did some of the work, but that provided its own obstacles.

"It was really challenging, because obviously, we were having to fuse multiple sets and outdoor locations in a way that feels like it's all being filmed in one shot," Daley says. "We also tried as much as we could to rely on practical environments. Obviously, our animals were fake for the most part, with the exception of our cat, but it was a lofty endeavor and one that I'm so appreciative of the studio for allowing us to do, because I think everyone knew going in that this was going to be über ambitious and really tough to pull off."

According to Goldstein, the sequence evolved as they realized what they could logistically pull off. "When you're in the storyboard and [previsualization] stage, everything seems possible. And then you get closer to it, and you have to make certain changes," he says.

Goldstein remembers one version of the sequence where Doric leaps through a wall as a mouse into a dining hall filled with soldiers who try to bash their beer mugs down on top of her as she scurries across the table. Another version gave a different spin to Doric's fall down a chimney and into a small house in cat form.

"Originally, when the cat lands in that little cabin, it looks over and there's a dog growling at it, and then it changed into, I think, a hyena, and then eventually changed into Doric," Goldstein explains. "We felt that wasn't quite working. So we had the idea of having a family be there. We shot that family against blue screen in L.A. and merged the two things together."

"There was also a moment when the mouse enters the cell with the prisoner," Daley adds. "In order to climb up the wall, it changes into a lizard. That was gonna be the first time that we really showcased that transformation without blocking it with any kind of foreground elements. We knew that to go from animal to humanoid form is always going to be bizarre-looking. We get into uncanny valley territory in that I don't think anyone wants to see Doric in a grotesque half-transformation state, but it was one of those opportunities where it's going from a CG asset to another CG asset."

They felt they could do the Wild Shape more like the way Doric transforms from horse to owlbear earlier in the film. "Ultimately, we couldn't afford to build another animal asset for that sequence, so it

Opposite: Sophia Lillis stars as the shape-shifting druid Doric. Above: The film's characters strategize and bounce off one another as organically as a real-life friend group.

stayed a mouse as it's climbing the brick wall to the window," Daley says.

In a separate interview with *EW* and her costars, Lillis says she initially assumed she would have to deliver some kind of animal-like movement for the performance. She put in the work before realizing it would largely be done through CGI.

"What I did was I watched a lot of animal documentaries and videos of animals and how they move," she says. "Like, how a bird flies off the branch. What do they do first with the arms and the legs? And how do they land? 'Cause I thought I was at least going to do something animal-like.

"I also did a movement class and stuff like that," she adds. "It was kind of embarrassing to walk around animal-like."

BEHIND A SURPRISE CAMEO

In addition to A-list talent like Pine, Rodriguez, Grant, and Page, *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves* has another big-name star. *A Star Is Born* and *American Hustle* actor Bradley Cooper makes a brief appearance as Marlamin, the mild-mannered and extremely short ex-husband of Rodriguez's Holga. Cooper, however, was a late addition. In fact, an early cut of D&D showed filmmaker Dexter Fletcher (*Rocketman, Eddie the Eagle*) portraying the role opposite Rodriguez.

In short, Fletcher did the crew a solid. Daley and Goldstein, who also wrote D&D with screenwriter Michael Gilio, always intended to cast an instantly recognizable actor in the role of Marlamin for the shock value. However, the COVID-19 pandemic made that challenging.

"Anybody who was willing to come to work with us had to endure a quarantine in the U.K. So it limited some of the choices we had," Goldstein says. They had one day to shoot the scene in which Holga makes a pit-stop at Marlamin's home and meets his new girlfriend. "Dexter was a friend of the court and someone who

we thought would be great, and he was kind enough to come and do the part," Goldstein adds.

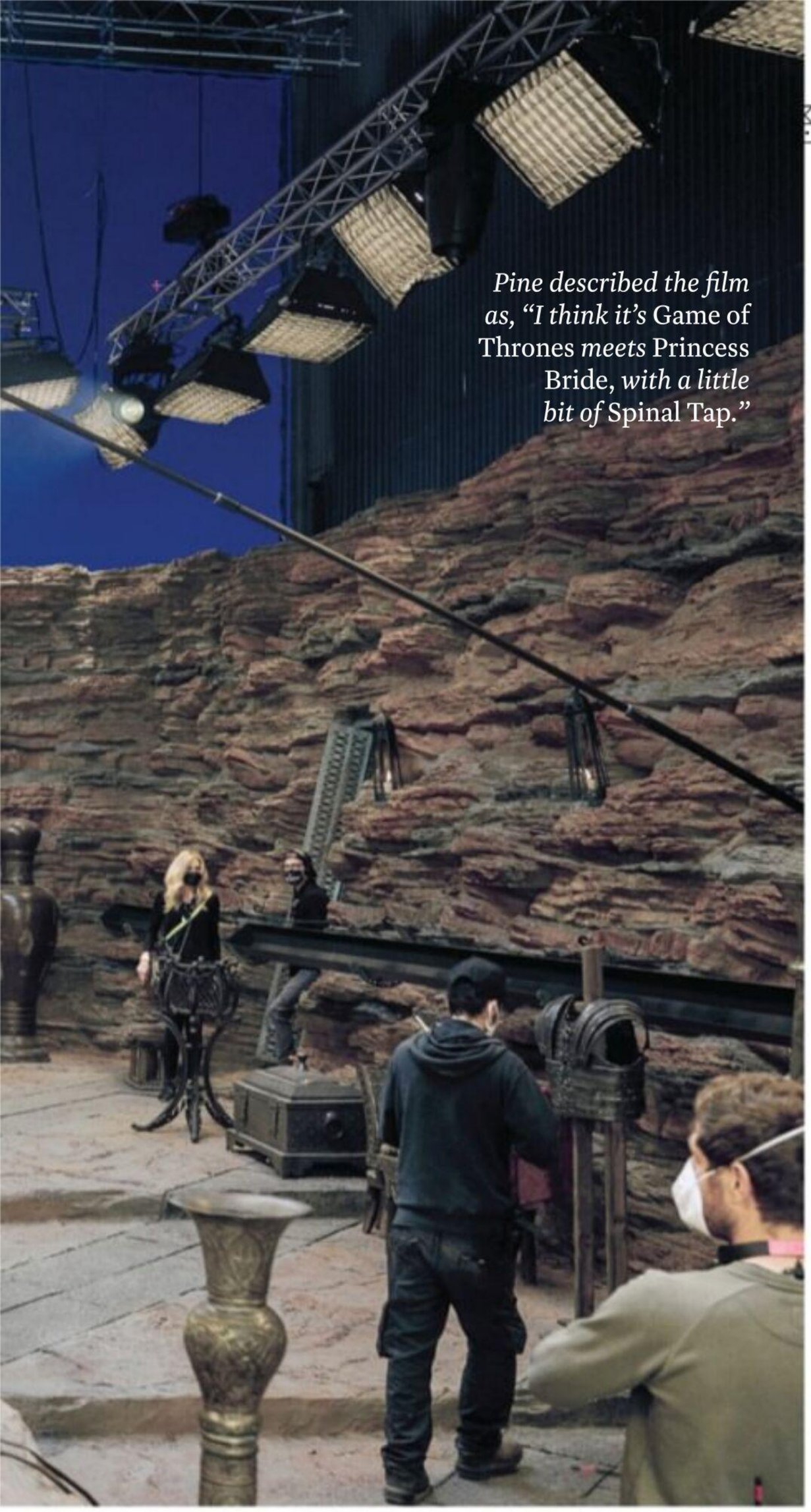
Fletcher has had an extended acting career, though these days he's more focused behind the camera on directing and producing. He knew the realities of the ask going in. "He was great," Daley notes. "It was a really sweet, touching scene, but our intention had always been to cast that role with someone who, immediately when they open the door, the audience gasps in recognition."

When Daley was 19, the *Freaks and Geeks* alum acted on the short-lived Fox series *Kitchen Confidential,* which starred Cooper. The two remained in touch. "I asked him on a lark if he would be game to come and spend a day with us," Daley recalls. "We sent him a rough cut of the film, and fortunately he really responded to it."

Part of the gag was the size discrepancy between the pint-size Marlamin and the hulking Holga. The filmmakers first shot Fletcher on a giant chair. Upon observing the cut of the scene, Daley says they realized "it wasn't as provocative."

"It wasn't as instantly disparate in his size compared to Holga," he adds. So they made the chair "30 percent bigger" for Cooper.

"Bradley is so good in the part," says Page. "Like, eyes as deep as the ocean. He just kind of emotion-bombs the entire movie."



Pine described the film as, "I think it's Game of Thrones *meets* Princess Bride, *with a little bit of* Spinal Tap."

"What I love about that scene is that it's hilarious, but it is also very sincere," Smith tells Rodriguez. "My heart ached for both of your characters."

"I felt like I dropped character for a second there, and it was like a spoof on a spoof within the movie, and then we can go back to suspension of disbelief," Rodriguez says. "'Cause for a moment there, I think everybody is not thinking about the character within the movie. They're just seeing Bradley Cooper, this iconic actor, celebrity, on screen. And I thought that was kind of really funny. I noticed in the audience at Austin [for the film's SXSW premiere], we all were thrown aback for a minute there. It was really cute. It was funny. It was a funny moment."

THE IMPACT ON THEIR BODIES

If you thought Page looked like a snack on *Bridgerton*, you might want to check out *Honor Among Thieves*. We're just saying.

During a lively Comic-Con panel with the film's cast and creators that delivered a first look at the fantasy epic, Page divulged that he had "the best ass" of his life while working out for the film.

Lillis assumed she would have to deliver animal-like movement for the performance before realizing it would largely be done through CGI.

"Lots of push-ups, lots of sit-ups," he said of the training process. "I got to swing a sword around for a living. Do you know what I mean? That is everything that you'd want growing up. And coming into this, I got really, really good with the swords. It was lots and lots of stunt training, so my thighs were killing me and I had the best ass of my life."

"You could wash clothes on 'em!" costar Rodriguez shouted as the crowd applauded.

"It was just the best time you could possibly imagine on this job. I spent time training and slaying dragons," Page added.

Grant, who had been making a lot of S&M dungeon master jokes throughout the panel, said, "It was really getting my bottom into shape, as well."

Producer Jeremy Latcham told *EW* in an interview ahead of the Comic-Con panel that Page's character is "the ultimate paladin." "He is holy, smart, on point, just very, very determined, and does not love the vibe of some of the other people in the group because he's a very moral man," Latcham says. "He represents the player who takes [the Dungeons & Dragons game] too seriously."

Rodriguez also had a great deal of working out to do in preparation for the part of Holga. She says she gained about 10 pounds of muscle. "Lots of working out, lots of protein shakes, lots of gas," she joked. ◆

CHAPTER 3

Modern Ventures

As more players experience the joys of Dungeons & Dragons, the franchise is expanding its reach into other business realms.

The wreckage of a spelljamming ship called the Lambent Zenith rests on the surface of a dying god in the vast Astral Sea.

Why We'll Always Love Dice

The players create the characters.
The Dungeon Master writes the story.
But the dice decide everything.

BY LISA EADICICCO

SOME PEOPLE LEARNED HOW TO bake homemade bread, speak a new language, or play a musical instrument during the coronavirus pandemic. But Tess Wolfe, a 27-year-old former teacher living in California, picked up a unique hobby: dice making.

Wolfe is the proprietor of an online specialty dice shop called Dreamy Dice, where she sells sets of glittery, translucent dice in varying shapes, sizes, and colors. Her creations fetch prices as high as $200-plus for a set. Her most expensive single die is currently the 40-millimeter, 20-sided Skyspeaker, a shimmering $200 polyhedron adorned with rose gold celestial shapes.

Wolfe's work has become so popular among fans of tabletop roleplaying games, particularly avid Dungeons & Dragons players, that she's been able to turn what was once a hobby into a full-time job. She made the switch after she realized she was earning more money through dice making than in her former job as a part-time community college teacher.

She was inspired to start crafting her own dice after watching online streams of D&D and then playing the game herself. Experiencing the game firsthand, in addition to watching it, gave Wolfe a newfound appreciation for those tiny geometric game accessories. "Dice are so integral to not just the game, but the culture around the game," she says. "And as I got more ingrained in the culture, I started seeing these dice that were so different."

There's a good reason why players are willing to pay top dollar for Wolfe's handmade creations. In D&D, dice are much more than just random number generators or instruments for determining an outcome. They can represent an extension of a player's character, a tangible vessel for illustrating their evolution, and so much more. They determine the story's progression, the world's direction and the destinies of the fictional personalities that populate

Dispel Dice sells hand-poured resin dice with myriad themes, ranging from Elden Ring to Halloween.

it. Dice can feel like inanimate, palm-size polyhedral grim reapers, guardian angels, or something in between, depending on how they fall.

It's for these reasons that dice collections have become a point of pride for many D&D players, making it possible for Wolfe and other independent dice collectors like her to make a business out of what started as a side project.

"Within the D&D community, there is much more importance associated with dice as like a fortune teller, almost like a fate kind of thing," says Ginny Di, a popular YouTube personality who creates advice videos for tabletop game players and Dungeon Masters (DMs), who narrate and write the story and facilitate gameplay during a session.

As elaborate as dice have become—you can find dice that levitate, dice made of bone, dice that glow in the dark, and dice-filled flowers—they came from humble beginnings. In the early days of D&D, in the 1980s, players colored in the numbers themselves. D&D games sold in the 1980s by TSR, the original publisher of D&D, even included a dice set complete with its own accompanying crayon.

On Reddit, you'll find lengthy threads full of comments from veteran players who remember coloring in their own dice back in the day (along with remarks from modern players surprised by how drastically the world of dice has changed). Like some of these Redditors, Geoffrey Engelstein, an award-winning tabletop game designer who has published books on the subject and taught a board game design course at NYU Game Center, remembers that point in time well. "It was just indents on all the sides for the numbers, and they were very hard to read," he said in reference to old-school dice. "So we used to rub them with crayons."

Dice weren't always as intricate as they are today, but they always played a fundamental role in D&D. In fact, the rules for the original version of the game have a section explaining the different dice used in the game, prefaced with, "This is a very important section. Please read it carefully."

Dice, whether they're physical or virtual, like the ones available in the D&D Beyond app, decide everything that happens in the game. They determine whether your Fire Bolt spell scorches your opponent, how much of a discount you'll get on that shiny longsword as you haggle with a local blacksmith, whether you discover the loot hidden in the cave you just explored, and how the tavern bar maiden responds to your flirtatious one-liners.

It's probably easier to list the parts of D&D that don't require a dice roll. That's because in a game as vast and broad as this, dice have the very important job of guiding the way for both players and DMs. "You need those sorts of prompts, those abilities to narrow down the sort of potential randomness that anything in the world could possibly happen," says Sydney Engelstein, Geoffrey's daughter, who also designs tabletop games and happens to have a massive dice collection. "It's always been not just a game mechanic but also kind of a DM crutch to help guide the story, which is so open-ended."

It's hard to pinpoint exactly when dice transitioned from utilitarian game pieces to revered trinkets. But the modern fixation on dice happens to coincide with D&D's more prevalent role in today's

When she's not showcasing the 10-year collection, Sydney Engelstein keeps her dice in crafting drawers.

pop culture. The main characters from the Netflix hit series *Stranger Things,* which was the most-streamed show in 2022, according to Nielsen, heavily references D&D. Vecna, the main antagonist from the show's most recent season, is also the name of a villainous being in D&D lore.

D&D has even spawned its own new style of entertainment through popular web series like *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20. Critical Role* started as a group of voice-actor friends who would broadcast their hours-long sessions online, and it's since flourished into a media company, complete with its very own animated series on Amazon Prime. Each week, millions of subscribers across YouTube and Twitch tune in to watch the story unfold and follow the shenanigans of the campaign's beloved characters, led by veteran Dungeon Master Matt Mercer.

Dimension 20, hosted by independent comedy platform Dropout TV, puts a different spin on D&D with a comedic twist. Spearheaded by writer, actor, and comedian Brennan Lee Mulligan, the show has gained such a fervent following that it scored a gig at Madison Square Garden—and sold out the venue, with ticket prices skyrocketing to $2,000 a pop.

"These icons are just that: icons," says *Scooby-Doo* and *Scream* actor Matthew Lillard in reference to the casts of *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20.* Lillard, a seasoned D&D player, is the cofounder of Beadle & Grimm's Pandemonium Warehouse, which sells dice sets, premium D&D editions, and other tabletop merchandise. "And so I think they're allowing

this community to grow in leaps and bounds, because they're bringing to it a passion, an incredible sense of gameplay."

Critical Role and *Dimension 20* have not just exposed D&D to a broader audience, they've proved that the game can still become something completely new and original even after 50 years. And that could be why there's been a newfound love of dice over the last decade, too.

Wolfe says dice makers will often make dice sets inspired by *Critical Role* characters or *Dimension 20* seasons. Doug Christensen, who creates gemstone dice in his home and sells them under the brand Hedron Rockworks, attributes the increased interest in dice to a combination of factors, including shows like *Critical Role* and *Stranger Things* and games like Baldur's Gate 3. As a new player, he says being able to watch D&D through *Critical Role* made learning about and understanding the game much more approachable. "I had wanted to play forever, but it was always this daunting thing," he says. "I didn't know people who were playing, and I didn't know how. And so being able to see people through live streaming, I think was a big part of it."

Social media also likely has a lot to do with the dice

Dreamy Dice is a one-person operation crafting unique sets (above). Below right: YouTuber Ginny Di advises players and Dungeon Masters.

renaissance, allowing anyone to marvel at handmade creations, whether they plan to purchase them or not. Instagram and YouTube have been particularly lucrative for attracting shoppers, according to Wolfe, although she notes that social media can be fickle. Christensen says he found himself scrambling to keep up with demand when a couple of Instagram Reels showing off his work went viral.

As the selection of dice has expanded, so have the ways in which players use them. While not all players are fascinated by dice (some have just as much fun pressing a button in an app), others use them to relate to their characters.

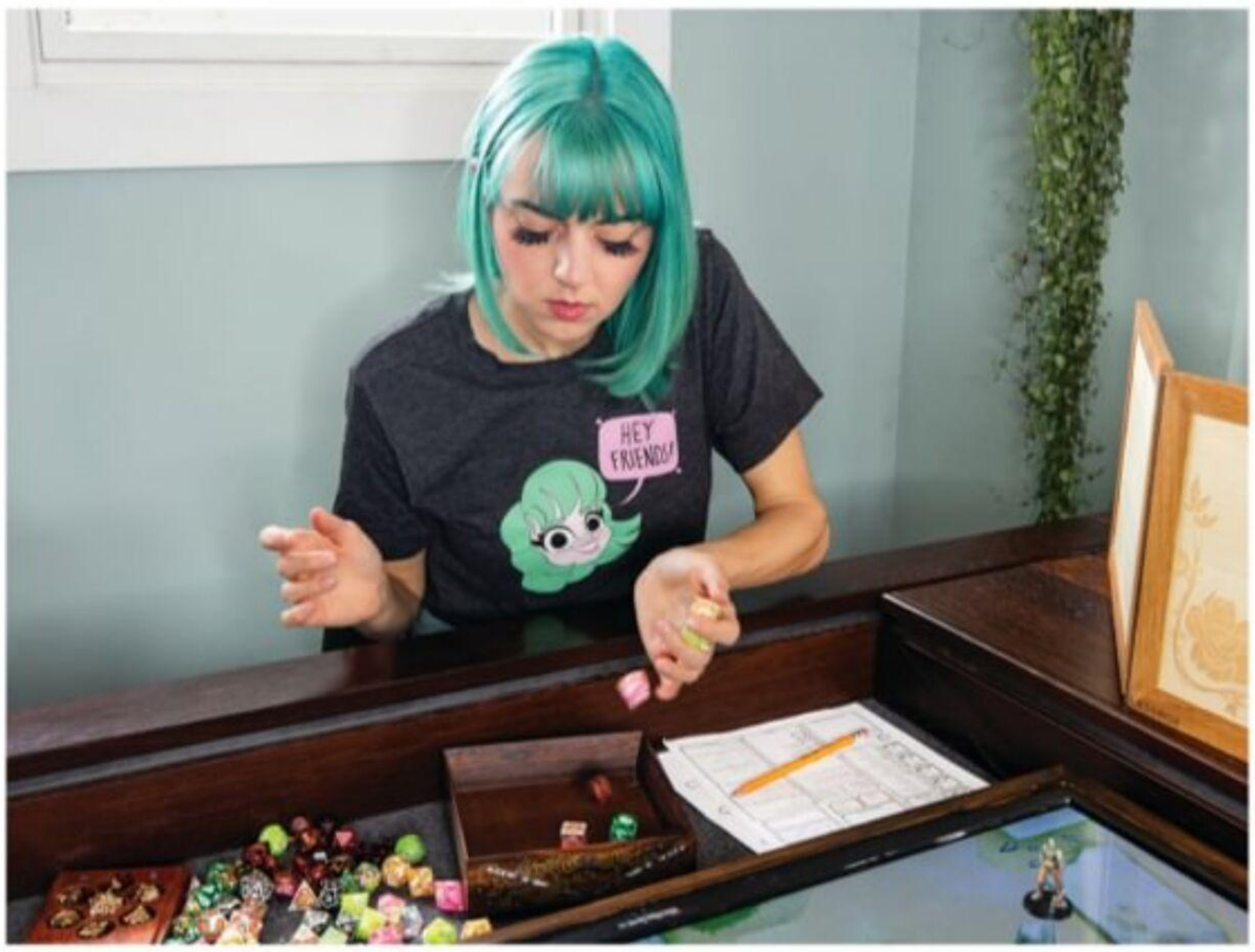
That's certainly the case for Lillard, who uses different sets of dice depending on the character he's playing. Each character has different mannerisms, personalities, and expressions, and dice are one way in which those attributes manifest during the game. "You can spend thousands, hundreds of thousands

of dollars on this hobby," he says. "But the dice are an easy access to express yourself at the table. And each character is a different expression."

Ginny Di goes a step beyond just having different sets of dice for specific characters. After creating what she refers to as a "dice palette" for each character, she'll sometimes swap out pieces to align with a character's development throughout the campaign. One such example includes a deep gnome barbarian character that started out as a mushroom farmer. She began the story using dice that had tiny mushrooms inside them as a nod to the character's origin.

But after two or three years, it was time to update the dice with something more fitting—much like the way a character's wardrobe might evolve over the course of a television show as storylines and personalities change. It's a fitting comparison for Di, considering she started out as a cosplayer and costume maker before creating D&D-oriented videos. "It makes no real difference to my gameplay, certainly not mechanically," she said. "But it helps keep me connected to the character."

An affinity for dice doesn't have to be character-driven. Some players collect dice simply because gathering a wide variety in different shapes, sizes, and colors is a way to commemorate their love of the game. A photo of Sydney Engelstein's dice went viral on the social media platform X, perhaps a sign that people just love admiring impressive collections.



Dice also allow players to inject more of themselves into the experience, which can be important in a game where the characters, plotlines, and dialogue are all up to the participants. For some, the idea of incorporating handmade game accessories, whether they be dice or hand-painted miniature figurines, adds another layer of personalization and authenticity to D&D. "That handmade portion of it is really big for the whole machine of D&D," said Christensen. "Not just the dice, but the dice tray, the cups that you're drinking out of, the scenery that you're playing on."

As beloved as dice may be for some players, they can also present an element of betrayal. Using your favorite dice doesn't guarantee your favorite outcome, and some players are superstitious about their dice for that exact reason. (As much as he loves his dice, Lillard says he has no problem tossing one back in the pile if it's not rolling the desired results.)

But that's part of the beauty of D&D: It's not up to the player or the DM, but the dice. Sydney Engelstein recalls one such example from a friend's campaign. When a player reaches zero hit points in D&D, they are required to roll saving throws to revive their character from unconsciousness. After a certain number of saving throws, the character is considered dead and is no longer playable in the game (barring a costly resurrection spell).

In this particular example, the DM kept coming up with excuses to provide more rolls, but the player failed even after six attempts. While it wasn't the desired outcome, the story took a wonderfully surprising turn because of it. "You have this literal random number generator that could throw a wrench into things," Engelstein says. "And you get to see the way the story bends."

Perhaps creating, collecting, and curating dice is the player's way of offsetting the randomness they can represent in D&D. For better or worse, there's no controlling how the dice fall. But players can use them to control how they represent their characters, and themselves, at the table. "It's a talisman," says Lillard. "It's a way to load into that character, and it's something that becomes as important as the adventure itself." ◆

The Video Game Link

D&D has influenced gaming from the start, and gaming, in turn, has helped inspire changes to D&D.

BY DANIEL HOWLEY

Baldur's Gate 3 *(2023) includes a D&D–style adventuring party, each with their own official combat class and backstory.*

THIS NEON-DRENCHED CITY IS under siege. Sprinting down a back alley, looking for any kind of refuge, I freeze as a group of Tyger Claws steps out from the shadows. The gleam of the light off their raised katanas proves I've crossed into the wrong neighborhood, and they're itching for a fight. Tick, tick, tick—my health points drop slowly at first, then steadily. But I'm prepared for this. My armor bonuses keep the worst of the gang members' blows from getting through. The digital dice rolling invisibly in the background fall in my favor, and I manage to fend off the attack, earning some new gear and experience points in the process.

No, I'm not actually prowling the streets of Night City. Rather, I'm lounging comfortably on my couch controlling the character V from the video game *Cyberpunk 2077*. And while it might seem unlikely, the scenario I just experienced—and countless others in games you've played throughout the years—was made possible thanks to Dungeons & Dragons.

Wizardry, Final Fantasy, The Last of Us, Call of Duty—each game takes key principles from Dungeons & Dragons. "So many of these fundamental ways we think about making games actually come from D&D," explains Sam Roberts, assistant director of the Interactive Media and Games Division at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts. "Levels, experience points, hit points—this stuff is all in D&D first. The way that [D&D] simulates the world through numbers is basically pervasive through modern video game design." V's health in my encounter with the Tyger Claws, his armor, the gear I picked up after the fight, all of that is based on ideas established by a half-century-old tabletop game.

Perhaps the best representation of this fusion of D&D and video games is *Baldur's Gate 3*. The winner of multiple game of the year awards in 2023, it perfectly translates the world of D&D into a 3D landscape that players can explore as freely as they would while playing a game with a pen and loose-leaf paper around a kitchen table.

Cyberpunk 2077*'s futuristic Night City, left, distills fundamentals from D&D. Above:* Dragon Quest II, *1987.*

But the relationship between D&D and gaming is mutually beneficial. Just as D&D has inspired video games, video games are, in turn, inspiring D&D.

FROM D&D TO QUAKE

Shortly after Tactical Studies Rules published the original D&D in 1974, Southern Illinois University students Gary Whisenhunt and Ray Wood began developing a game based on the roleplaying game for the Plato computer system. A rudimentary computer by today's standards, the Plato system was a large computer with its own room in SIU's library. Originally developed for educational purposes, Plato featured early versions of email, messaging, and network connectivity via telephone lines that allowed the computers to talk to other Plato systems at participating universities.

According to Whisenhunt, other students had developed a D&D-style game named *pedit5,* or *The Dungeon,* but administrators deleted the title because it was unauthorized software. Because Whisenhunt had administrative privileges for the Plato computer at SIU, he and Wood could build their own D&D-style game and keep it up and running without interruption. They named it—what else—*dnd.*

Despite its relatively basic look, character designs that lacked depth, and dungeons that were simply hallways made up of individual lines, the game is notable for introducing the notion of boss fights to video games, giving players one final challenge before wrapping up their quest. "We wanted the game to have something…big at the end," Whisenhunt says. "And so, when you have monsters and creatures and stuff, it's like, well, you need a super monster here of some kind, right?"

A number of similar titles inspired by the tabletop game followed suit, including 1981's *Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord.* One of the most successful early Dungeons & Dragons–style games, *Wizardry* required players to form their own party of six adventurers and traverse a 10-floor maze to face off against the wizard Werdna. The game included mechanics like armor class, spells, and character stats like strength and stamina. And while it might not be visually stunning compared with today's games, it managed to hook players at the time.

Wizardry helped spark the imagination of a generation of early video game developers. "There were a lot of creators at the time in the early '80s who were thinking, 'Gee, this D&D stuff is pretty cool. How could you make a video game out of it?'" explains Dan Rawson, senior vice president of Dungeons & Dragons at Wizards of the Coast. "The first video game I played was on an Apple IIe, *Wizardry.* My dad brought home *Wizardry* and I thought, 'Holy smokes, this is D&D with little green lines.'"

Pioneering game developer Yuji Horii also took inspiration from D&D and *Wizardry* and created the ultimate recipe for video-game roleplaying games: *Dragon Quest.* Released in 1986 in Japan and in the U.S. in 1989, where it was localized as *Dragon Warrior, Dragon Quest* follows the story of a young hero as he works to defeat the evil Dragonlord. The quintessential Japanese roleplaying game, *Dragon Quest* inspired a vast range of developers to build their own games, including *Final Fantasy* creator Hironobu Sakaguchi, who credits *Dragon Quest* for influencing the long-running roleplaying series, to *Elden Ring* developer Hidetaka Miyazaki, who cites *Dragon Quest* as one of the games that led him to develop his punishingly difficult *Souls* series of titles. "*Dragon Quest* is so hugely influential," says *Washington Post* videogame critic Gene Park. "There are so many games that take from it."

Dungeons & Dragons didn't just influence roleplaying games, though. The 1996 first-person shooter *Quake* was initially envisioned as a 3D roleplaying title based around a nonplayer character from developer John Carmack's Dungeons & Dragons campaign. An all-powerful warrior, the character, appropriately named Quake, was supposed

to wield a Thor-like hammer of thunderbolts and a ring of regeneration. But the technological challenges of building a new game engine while attempting to create such an ambitious game forced the team to change course.

D&D TO 3D

Throughout the years, video games have evolved from the simple, 2D lines of *dnd* and the bright, friendly sprites of *Final Fantasy* to the hyperrealistic 3D models you see in titles like *Cyberpunk*. Despite getting a visual facelift, though, many of the concepts codified in D&D continue to permeate modern titles so deeply that disentangling the two is all but impossible. "There are some elements of D&D specifically that you can see that are deep in the DNA of both single and multiplayer computer roleplaying games," explains Jessica Hammer, associate professor of learning sciences at Carnegie Mellon University's Human-Computer Interaction Institute and the Entertainment Technology Center.

Games that might seem at first blush to be cut from a wholly different cloth than D&D still carry its various quirks and mechanics. Take 2022's *God of War Ragnarok*. Sure, the PlayStation title includes elves and other mythical creatures, but that's not where D&D comes in. It's in the structure of the game, the way that every time the main character, Kratos, levels up, he increases his health or adds new skills, like the ability to grab enemies with his flaming blades of chaos, that pull from the strands of D&D's DNA. It's no different than adding new spells or choosing a subclass for your D&D character each time you reach a new level. *The Witcher 3, Starfield, Horizon Zero Dawn, Pokémon, Halo, Hades*—all modern game franchises, despite their genres, have taken bits and pieces from D&D. Any game that involves combat can trace its roots to the tabletop game played with notebooks in hobby shops and dorm rooms across the globe. "I think that especially how D&D handles combat was really powerful, because it turned into an algorithm," says Hammer.

Multiplayer online games in particular capture one of the most important details of D&D: working together with other players. D&D's system of classes is made up of various healers, fighters, ranged attackers, and spell casters. Each of those help to balance the others out—without healers, fighters will die; without spell casters, healers can't defend from other casters and fighters. That idea is tightly bound to games like *World of Warcraft, League of Legends,* and *Battlefield*. "In D&D, right, you've got your rogues and your wizards. If you look at MMOs or massive online battle areas [MOBAs], you start to see that abstracted into what you might call the tank, damage per second, healer, triangle," Hammer explains. "It comes back to this same idea that really comes from Dungeons & Dragons as a social game experience."

One of the best examples of D&D's influence on modern games comes in *Baldur's Gate 3*. The follow-up to *Baldur's Gate* and *Baldur's Gate 2* takes place in the D&D universe, but that's not why it's such an excellent illustration of D&D's influence on gaming. It's the way *Baldur's Gate 3* captures the kind of emergent narratives that develop naturally in D&D and allow players to create their own unique experiences on every playthrough that proves it's the progeny of tabletop games. See a suspicious cow? Take a potion of animal speaking to find out what's up with that befuddling bovine. Bypass a character in a trap early in the game? You'll have a completely different playthrough than someone who saved them.

From having to roll a 20-sided die to understanding how terrain affects your movement, *Baldur's Gate 3* is not merely influenced by D&D—it's D&D distilled to its most potent form in a 3D world. Every move you make is pure D&D. Each time you enter battle in the game, you roll for initiative to see if you and your party or your enemies attack first. Your weapons have a base damage amount that's then modified by dice rolls depending on whether the item does some kind of elemental damage.

Encounters with nonplayer characters are determined by how well you roll and whether your character has enough charisma or perception. Even the way you interact with your in-game party members is meant to evoke the feeling of playing alongside your friends in a game of tabletop D&D. "*Baldur's Gate* was probably the quintessential digital representation of D&D fifth edition," says Dan Ayoub, vice president and head of game studios at Wizards of the Coast. "I think those core principles that D&D represents and those core mechanics that are getting translated into gameplay are so universal, lend themselves so well to video games in this style of play, that people come in and they stay."

Baldur's Gate 3 and its predecessors aren't the only official D&D games out there. There have been several official D&D-partnered games, including the highly regarded *Neverwinter Knights* and the

During a combat encounter in Baldur's Gate 3, *players have the same action economy as in D&D, with a choice of various spells and attacks.*

Icewind Dale series. But *Baldur's Gate 3* managed to capture the essence of D&D in such an approachable package that it became a runaway success, winning awards, acclaim, and praise from D&D players and newcomers alike.

VIDEO GAMES TO D&D AND BACK

As video games have evolved through the years, creators and programmers developed new paradigms that subsequently fed back into D&D. "Just like D&D has deeply influenced all of these video games in ways that are actually invisible to most of us…the same has been happening to D&D," Roberts explains. "Stuff that's been lifted in has really improved the design of the games and the quality of playing, and new ways to think about play have sort of just been subsumed into [D&D]."

One of the ways in which D&D pulled from video games was the advent of power cards in D&D fourth edition to add structure and a more accessible entry point for newer players. The power cards literally told players how to use their individual class actions, ensuring they could quickly and easily access them during a session. This kind of interactivity, similar to context menus in video games, helped streamline the playing process. And while the fourth edition was panned by some, it's seen somewhat of a resurgence in the years since it was released in 2008.

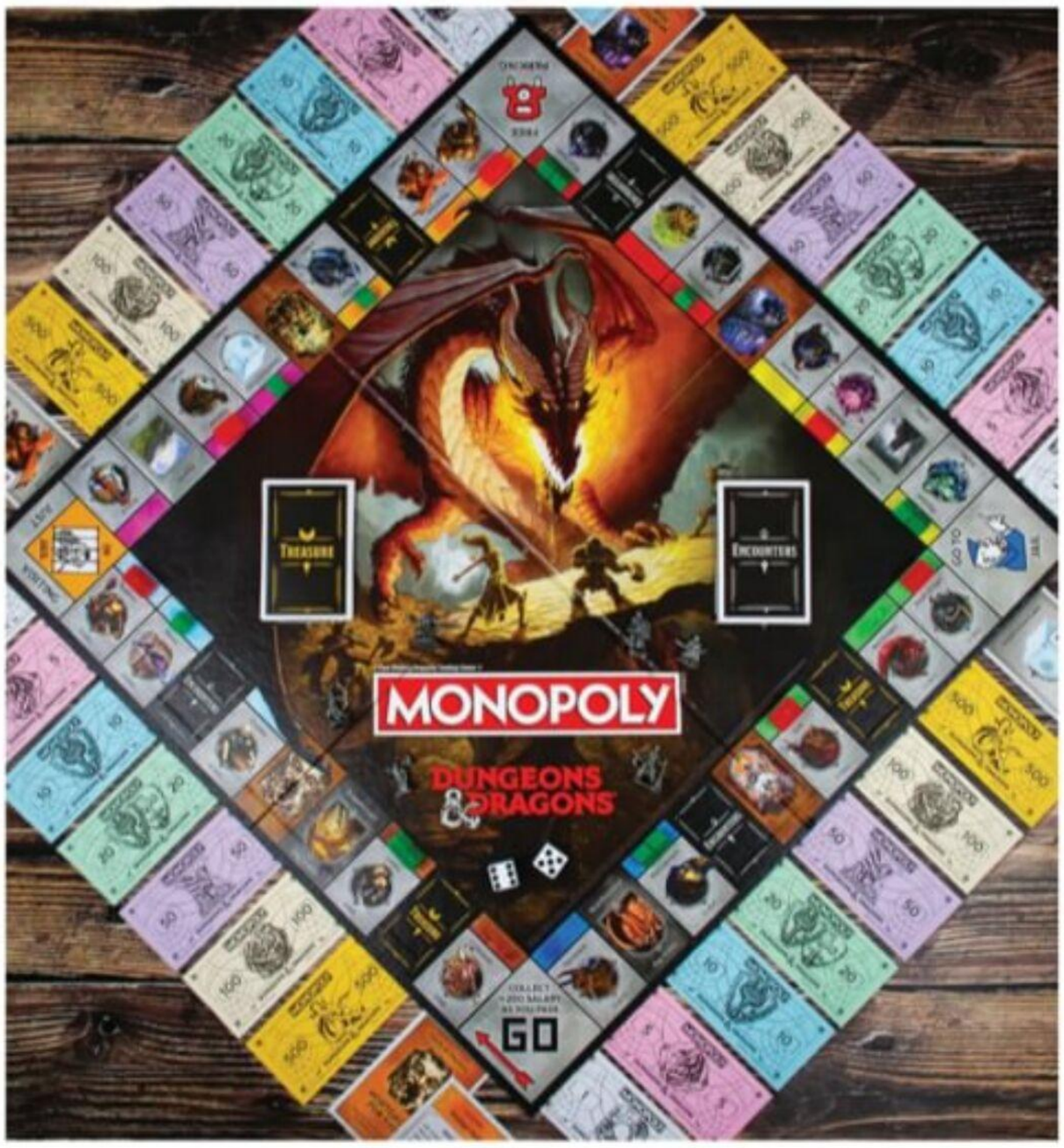
The fourth edition also carried a deeper sense of collaboration between players that was born out of the kind of class balances developed in games like *Everquest,* which themselves were inspired directly by D&D. "That has flown heavily back into tabletop roleplaying games," says Roberts. "D&D, and most of the stuff like it, is you play with your friends, and everybody has to take on a role. And that actually is the influence of video games back into the format."

Beyond certain gameplay mechanics and styles, D&D has gained another important element from video games: new players. Titles like *Baldur's Gate 3* have helped expand D&D's audience, giving gamers a grander sense of what a campaign looks like than a person explaining it over a card table ever could. "I think you see a natural progression of people from D&D into video games, and I think what's fabulous now is you're seeing it go the other way," Ayoub says. "I'm just seeing many stories of people who have never played the pen-and-paper D&D game getting into it because [they've played video] games like *Baldur's Gate 3*." ◆

THE MANY PARTNERSHIPS

Dungeons & Dragons has forged all sorts of cool, unique, and bizarre collaborations over its 50-year history. Here are some of the standouts.

BY AVA ERICKSON



MONOPOLY
A tabletop game–themed tabletop game? Launched in 2021, D&D Monopoly joined the ranks of other themed Monopolies like Hello Kitty, Beetlejuice, and even RuPaul Monopoly to let players buy, sell, and mortgage their way through their favorite fictional worlds. While it's a little unclear exactly how you build a hotel on a goblin, the game seems to be a hit, garnering a 4.8-star rating on Amazon.

CONVERSE SNEAKERS
First launched at the 2024 Gary Con, the Converse line celebrates D&D's 50-year history with vintage illustrations from the game, including Zarak the Assassin from the 1983 supplement The Shady Dragon Inn and Warduke from the beloved '80s cartoon.

CANDLES
It turns out that sorcerers smell like sandalwood and cedar; wizards emit a patchouli and geranium scent; and monks have more of an oakmoss and amber aroma. That is, according to the Table Top Candle company, a small business that created a line of D&D candles.

LEGO SET

When Lego and D&D enthusiast Lucas Bolt submitted his fan design to one of Lego's building challenges, he was a shoo-in for the grand prize. Lego soon launched a set to commemorate the 50th anniversary of D&D largely inspired by his design. Complete with a tower, giant red dragon, and even a gelatinous cube, the set includes 3,745 pieces and retails for $359.99.

POP-TARTS

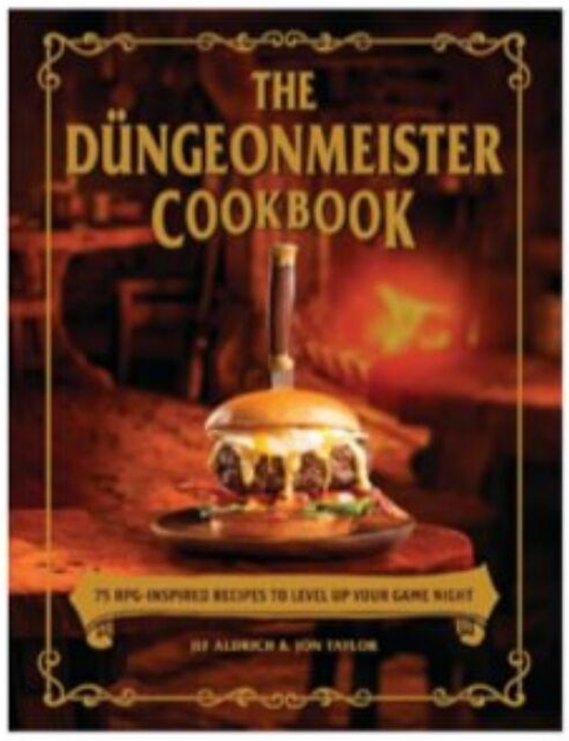
Bards and Wizards can cast a funny spell that makes the creature of their choice fall into uncontrollable fits of laughter. To cast this spell, players need two key ingredients: tiny tarts and a feather that's waved in the air. In 2020, Pop-Tarts decided to adopt one of these ingredients, offering up Tasha's Hideous Laughter–themed Pop Tarts in a frosted goodberry flavor.

SUBSCRIPTION BOX

For $40 a month, D&D fans can receive a subscription box that the company Dragons Nest Delivery promises will "satisfy your dice goblin heart." The boxes come with a set of dice (you can never have too many dice), minis, snacks, and downloadable materials to keep your campaign going.

D20 BACKPACK

Nothing screams D&D more than the 20-sided die, and this D&D backpack takes it to the next level. While the shape may be a bit cumbersome, customers love it. "You kidding me? Worth every penny," wrote one reviewer on Amazon.



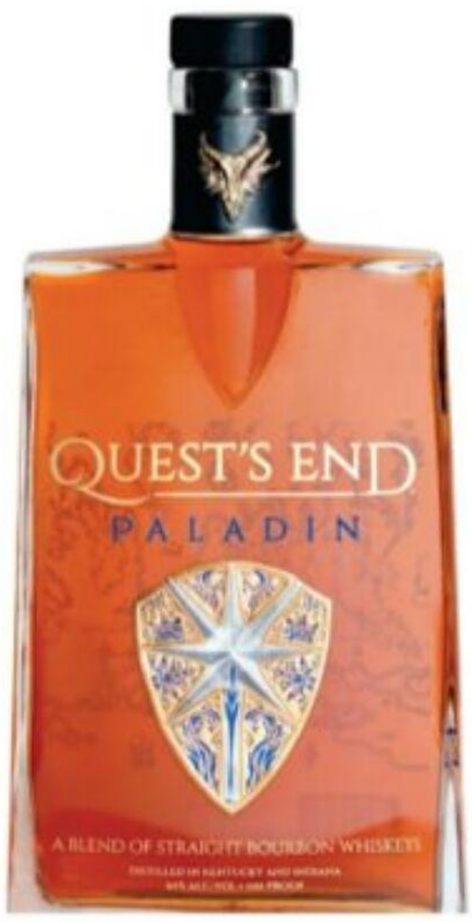
MASTER COOKBOOK

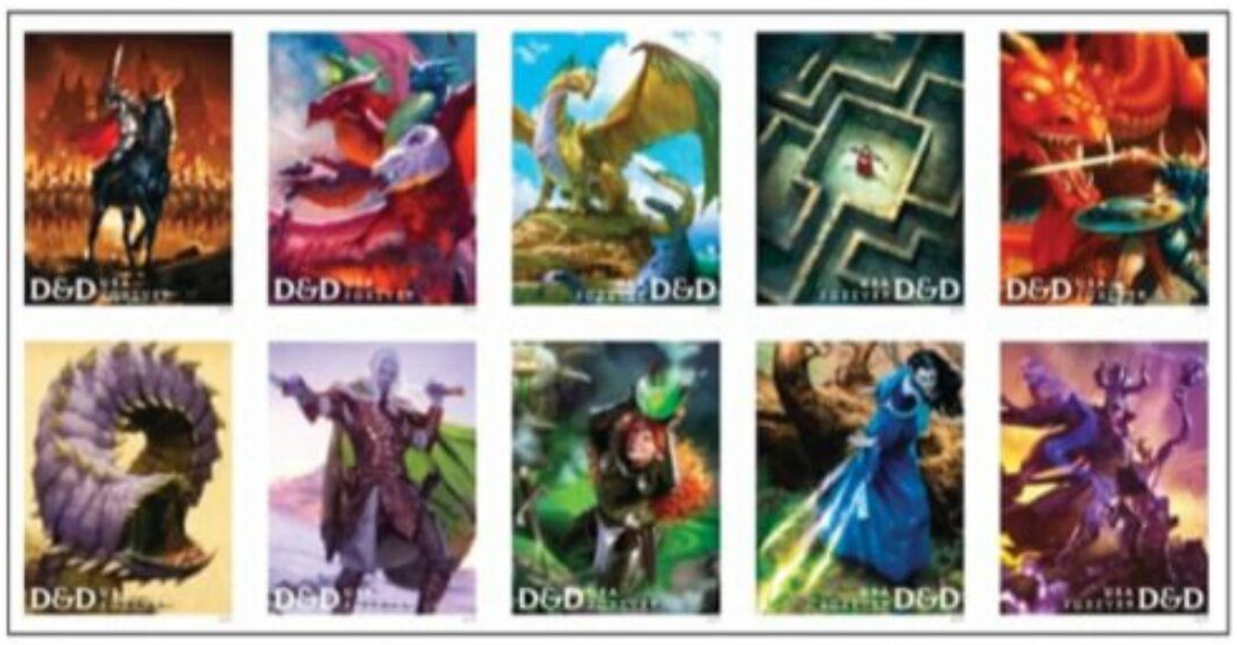
How to host the best D&D campaign ever? Charm your players with food, of course. Written by Jef Aldrich and Jon Taylor, hosts of the roleplaying game review podcast *System Mastery, The Düngeonmeister Cookbook* promises to deliver easy-to-follow meals inspired by D&D, like the mimic munchies: cookie monsters complete with cherry Airhead tongues and mini marshmallow teeth.

VACATION SPOT
Since 2018, D&D in a Castle has been hosting four-day immersive trips. They can run over $5,000 and include a stay in a D&D-themed castle and eight hours of gameplay with D&D pros every day.

ALOHA SHIRT
In commemoration of the 50th anniversary, D&D collabed with classic Aloha shirt brand Reyn Spooner. The print features six scenes representing each of the abilities. For example, for Charisma, the party is shown at the Yawning Portal Tavern enjoying beer and sharing stories of their adventures.

WHISKEY
One of the latest additions to the arsenal of celebrity liquors is Matthew Lillard's D&D-themed whiskey Quest's End. A lifelong D&D player, Lillard launched the Paladin flavor first, as paladins have strong conviction: "We feel the same way about this company, the idea of building stuff for fandoms," he has said.





STAMPS
Even the U.S. postal service decided to get on board with the celebration of D&D's 50th anniversary, launching a collection of 10 D&D-themed stamps. Designed by USPS art director Greg Breeding using existing illustrations, the stamps depict popular characters and iconic art.

ENGAGEMENT RING
For the most passionate D&D players, Rickson Jewelry offers themed engagement rings. For one of them, the diamond (which can be any stone, including a genuine diamond) is hugged by two mini d20s. All D&D couples need now is a Ceremony spell to seal the deal.

CHAPTER 4

Healing Words

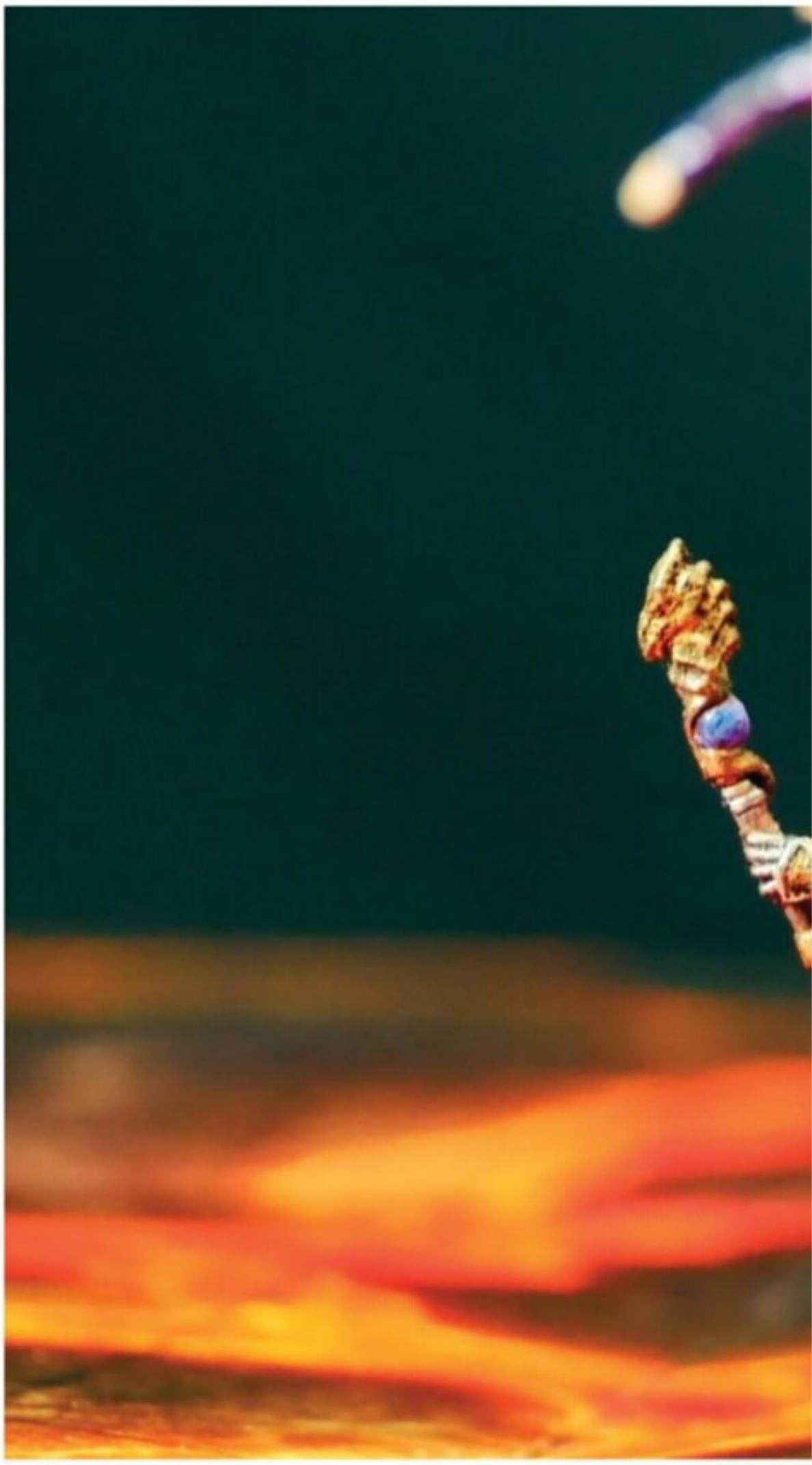
Gathering with friends to roleplay challenges and victories has been a powerful medium, in both casual and clinical settings.

A classic action-hero archetype, the Fighter class in D&D fifth edition is a potent damage-dealing character-creation option.

Therapy and Play

Psychologists and researchers have found that playing Dungeons & Dragons can be an effective way to treat mental health conditions.

BY ASHLEY ABRAMSON



WHAT COMES TO MIND WHEN YOU think of a psychotherapy session? You might picture an awkward conversation with a complete stranger who takes notes as you air your most personal problems. Or perhaps you picture yourself lying on a couch while an intimidating onlooker analyzes your every word. What if, instead of traditional talk therapy, you could slay dragons alongside your therapist, working through your struggles, processing your emotions, and working toward your mental-health goals as a character in a game?

As tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) like Dungeons & Dragons have skyrocketed in popularity over the past several years, therapists and psychologists have turned to game therapy groups as a way to explore real-life problems without the potential discomforts of a one-on-one counseling session. Building on experimental modalities like art, music, and animal-assisted therapy, gaming as therapy allows participants to work on their mental health in an environment that feels safe—and even fun.

Although there are no randomized controlled trials that prove the method's efficacy and suggest

While conquering fears and traumas can be hard, channeling that work into defeating a dragon can help growth feel more achievable.

the best ways to use it, therapists who incorporate TTRPGs in treatment say they're seeing great success with the approach—and that the premise is a great way to reduce harmful stigmas around therapy and help more people improve their mental health.

BREAKING STIGMAS

Stigmas driven by misunderstandings about mental illness and its treatments are one of the biggest barriers preventing people from seeking out professional support. Making therapy fun, and especially incorporating games that people are familiar with or want to learn how to play, can encourage people who might not otherwise consider seeing a mental health professional.

"It gives people an 'in' to the mental-health field without it being scary," says therapist Charlene MacPherson, founder of Nerd Adventure Therapy 20 in Baltimore. Some clients, MacPherson says, want to see a therapist and find the nontraditional setup more comfortable. Others come to her D&D therapy group simply as a safe, nonjudgmental place to learn how to play the game.

Charlene MacPherson, a therapist in the Baltimore area, uses "nerdy" and pop-culture interests to help her clients make sense of the world.

Because Dungeons & Dragons is by nature a collaborative group game, it lends itself most effectively to therapy groups ranging from two to seven or eight people. Typically, general therapy groups—led by a therapist with several participants—are useful for finding a supportive community and teaching people skills to help with issues such as anxiety, depression, and neurodivergent conditions like ADHD and autism. In any group, people can work on their therapy goals and practice them in real time, with feedback from other members and the therapist.

But therapists say it's notoriously difficult to get people to come to groups. Showing up to therapy and being vulnerable in front of others can feel intimidating, especially if someone is already struggling with low motivation from depression or has social anxiety. Framing it as a gaming therapy group can help, says psychologist Megan Connell, author of *Tabletop Role-Playing Therapy: A Guide for the Clinician Game Master.*

Many therapists who use TTRPGs adopt a more casual approach. MacPherson is a self-proclaimed nerd who has blue hair and regularly wears T-shirts in therapy, which also helps create a safe space for people who might feel nervous about opening up to a therapist.

In either case, MacPherson says, many group attendees start out hesitant to pursue individual therapy, but after attending the group a few times, they're also open to and even excited about the prospect of one-on-one talk therapy sessions that don't involve the game. "It's like hiding the therapeutic pill in the game cheese," says William Nation, a staff psychologist at Johns Hopkins University who leads Dungeons & Dragons therapy groups.

GAMIFYING GROWTH

The structure of Dungeons & Dragons is especially conducive to helping people because therapists can create stories that challenge the characters and help

them grow based on their individual needs. Nation and his cofacilitator, for example, meet with college student clients prior to placing them in a group to learn about their symptoms and goals, along with providing them with resources they need to understand and play the game, like books and dice.

The storyline and gameplay vary based on the needs of the clients and the expertise of the therapist. As part of her intake assessment, MacPherson helps clients create characters with backstories and traits that align with their therapy goals, then creates the entire campaign to integrate everyone in the group.

During the actual game, the therapist plays the Dungeon Master, narrating the game and setting up opportunities to challenge characters in an environment that feels safer or less intimidating than processing feelings or practicing skills in real life—MacPherson describes it as a "microcosm of society" where people can try new things without the fear of real-world consequences.

"In a roleplaying game, when you're playing an amazing wizard, you have a once-removed distance from your problems that helps you see them differently," says Connell. "You can see your struggles in a different light and understand what's going on without defense mechanisms getting in the way of healing."

Therapists can easily adjust the story as needed when something's not working or someone needs a new challenge. Connell appreciates the ability to introduce new obstacles that elicit a particular response and ultimately help the client practice skills they want to grow in. On the flip side, if things are feeling too intense, the therapist can scale back as needed to prevent overwhelming the client. This is especially helpful, MacPherson says, when a client has experienced trauma. The goal is to help them practice new skills to cope with their symptoms, not to retraumatize them.

Most of MacPherson's clients are neurodivergent adults who identify as women or nonbinary, so she uses the game to help them gain new skills to navigate the world with brain differences like autism or ADHD. "Neurodivergent people like to do things creatively, and the real world often tells us 'No, do it this way,'" MacPherson says. "Allowing players to come up with and play out their own awesome ideas gives them a confident boost."

For players who struggle with anxiety, the game can provide opportunities to learn about speaking up for oneself or overcoming fears. For example, Nation says his college-age participants sometimes want to work on having difficult conversations with others—even to express romantic interest—which can feel high-stakes for someone with anxiety or neurodivergence. Setting a boundary or expressing a need between characters in a game usually feels less stressful than doing it in real life. "Maybe it goes badly, but hopefully the person gets insight or at least practice that helps them feel more comfortable in new situations," Nation says.

Roleplaying is also helpful for addressing negative thinking patterns that can affect people with depression. If a battle is going poorly or a player isn't doing well, MacPherson usually addresses their negative comments and encourages them to reframe the situation more positively or ask for support.

For players who struggle with anxiety, the game can provide opportunities to learn about speaking up for oneself or overcoming fears.

She also sometimes encourages players to practice supporting or encouraging another character who's feeling depressed so they can practice helpful self-talk techniques that translate to real life.

Players can also create monsters that represent their mental illness so they can converse about what it looks like to "fight" their anxiety or depression and then apply the concept to their everyday lives. "One of my clients made a gelatinous cube monster to represent depression, because it envelops you and you feel heavy and slow," says Connell. "Together with other players, they realized it was easier to fight if you have other people rallying with you to help you move."

Therapists often address improving social skills in groups, too, and not just between players. Connell says the game can help people, especially those with autism, think about what their character would want to do in a given situation rather than what they'd want to do in real life. Maybe the player

wants to upgrade weapons, but the original weapon belonged to the character's father. The player could take the character's perspective and gain empathy, starting in the game.

At the end of the group gameplay, which often lasts up to 90 minutes, therapists usually take time to process the session with players so they can gain insight about themselves and how they want to grow. Connell's practice focuses on helping women and girls from middle school to adulthood learn how to communicate assertively while supporting and cooperating with other women. Recently, she set up a game where the group members had to work together to collect a valuable item, but she put multiple copies of the item in the game. After the goal had been achieved, one player wanted to get an extra copy of the item for themselves, which would risk the success of the mission. The group faced a conflict where some clients started shutting down and not voicing their feelings. "We talked about how our actions can affect other people, but also how we respond to conflict and how we can better resolve it," Connell says.

MacPherson likes to meet separately with individual clients after group game sessions to process the gameplay and recognize the ways they're working on goals. She says it's often easier to dig deeper privately, without being in front of other people. "They start to realize the game isn't just fun, but they're working on their goals, and they're starting to do it outside of the group," she says.

Some therapists pursue formal training about how to effectively integrate TTRPGs into therapy. Groups like Geek Therapeutics or Game to Grow provide continuing education hours and certification for therapists and other behavioral health providers, offering insight on logistics like how to bill insurance for gameplay sessions and therapeutic skills such as helping clients create characters that will help them build emotional insight. Other therapists simply integrate their own background and interest in the games into their therapeutic expertise.

Suffocating and all-encompassing, a battle with a gelatinous cube is an apt metaphor for a client's struggle with depression.

A BRIGHT FUTURE

Until there are double-blind studies researching gaming in therapy, mental-health providers are relying on case studies and research from adjacent therapies like art, drama, and music therapy. "We're still exploring the best and most efficient ways to use games, and what can and can't be done," says Nation. As long as the therapist is confident with leading the game, and as long as the clients are open-minded about getting something out of the group, he says gaming as therapy can be psychologically useful.

Therapists can also use TTRPGs like D&D in therapy for people with more serious mental illnesses, such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, and even in settings that serve at-risk youth or people with eating disorders. It's not limited to therapy, either. At Johns Hopkins, Nation and his cofacilitators also lead a non-therapy D&D workshop where

students can play parts in a story written "in line with learning and objectives we want people on campus to learn about."

Dungeons & Dragons is a particularly easy game to use in therapy, therapists agree: Along with its versatility in therapeutic settings, it has a large fan base and name recognition, it's easily accessible, and it's relatively simple to learn. But D&D isn't the only TTRPG game therapists can use. There are thousands of styles of RPGs for therapists to experiment with to better cater to their clients' needs and interests.

So far, Connell says, roleplaying games "seem to be limitless in their potential for helping people" address personal-growth goals, whether it's dealing with mental health symptoms, gaining confidence, or building community. In one recent D&D game, a group of Connell's youth clients worked together to fight off a dragon. Once Connell narrated that the dragon was slain, everyone in the table burst into tears. "They all jumped up and hugged each other," she says. "One of them said, 'Look what I can do when I'm with my friends. I can slay dragons. I can do anything.'" ◆

The Magic of D&D Can Save Us

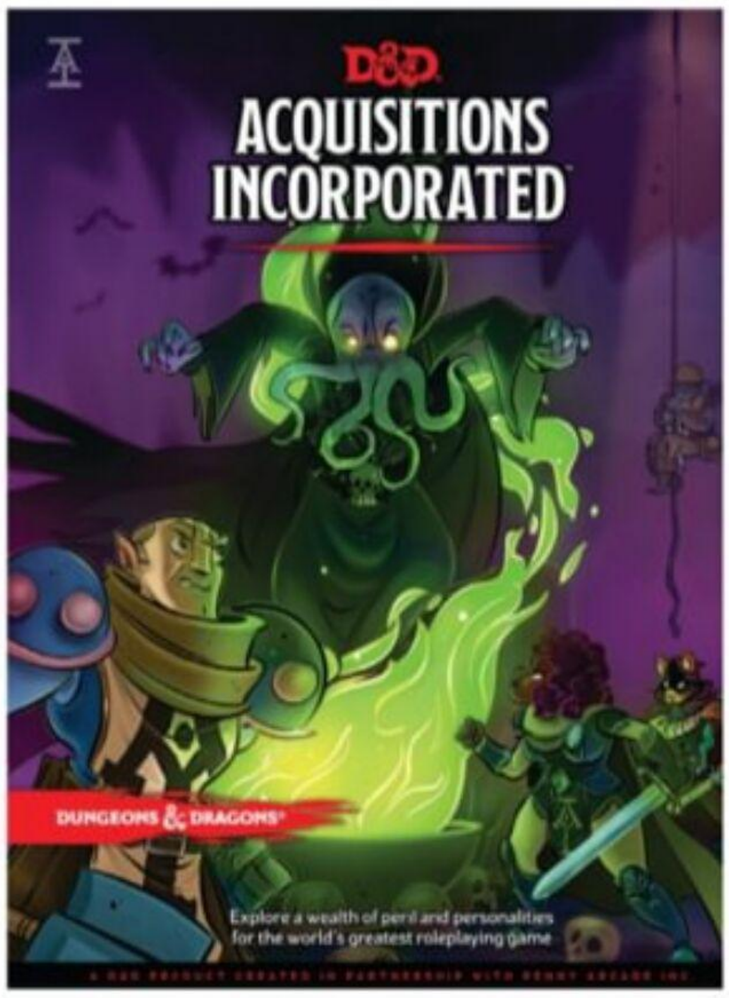
A game designer on Dungeons & Dragons' fifth edition shares her journey with roleplaying games and the power of playing pretend.

BY KATE WELCH

The Ghosts of Saltmarsh *sourcebook offers a tool kit for ocean adventures.*

I BECAME AWARE OF DUNGEONS & Dragons at the same instant that I was made to believe that D&D was maybe not for me. In 2003, I was working in a coffee shop in a small North Carolina town. (College and I hadn't gotten along, and I didn't have anything close to a five-year plan.) The boys who sat in the back of the shop ordered nothing but water for hours and stopped talking only when I delivered it to them, giving me the distinct impression that, whatever secret conversations they were having, I wasn't welcome. It took me weeks to even realize that what they were doing was playing D&D. I'm pretty sure they thought I'd make fun of them for it.

We've all heard the stories, seen the shows, and watched the movies where the "nerds" get beat up for their hobbies. Many (particularly men) cling to this experience like a trophy: If you weren't persecuted in the '80s for your interest in Star Wars or D&D, you haven't really suffered for love. Perhaps not. But D&D, at its very core, is a game you have to play with other people. It's a game that requires the intimacy that comes with community. Simply put: You had to have at least one friend as nerdy as you to play.



Growing up as a self-described "nerdy girl," I often felt invisible and excluded for my interests (even by the nerdy guys around me), and I was exceptionally lonely as a result. So I know how those boys in the coffee shop felt. I'd been a devoted Star Wars roleplayer in online chat rooms since I was 13. It wasn't a hobby you shared with folks. It was something you hid.

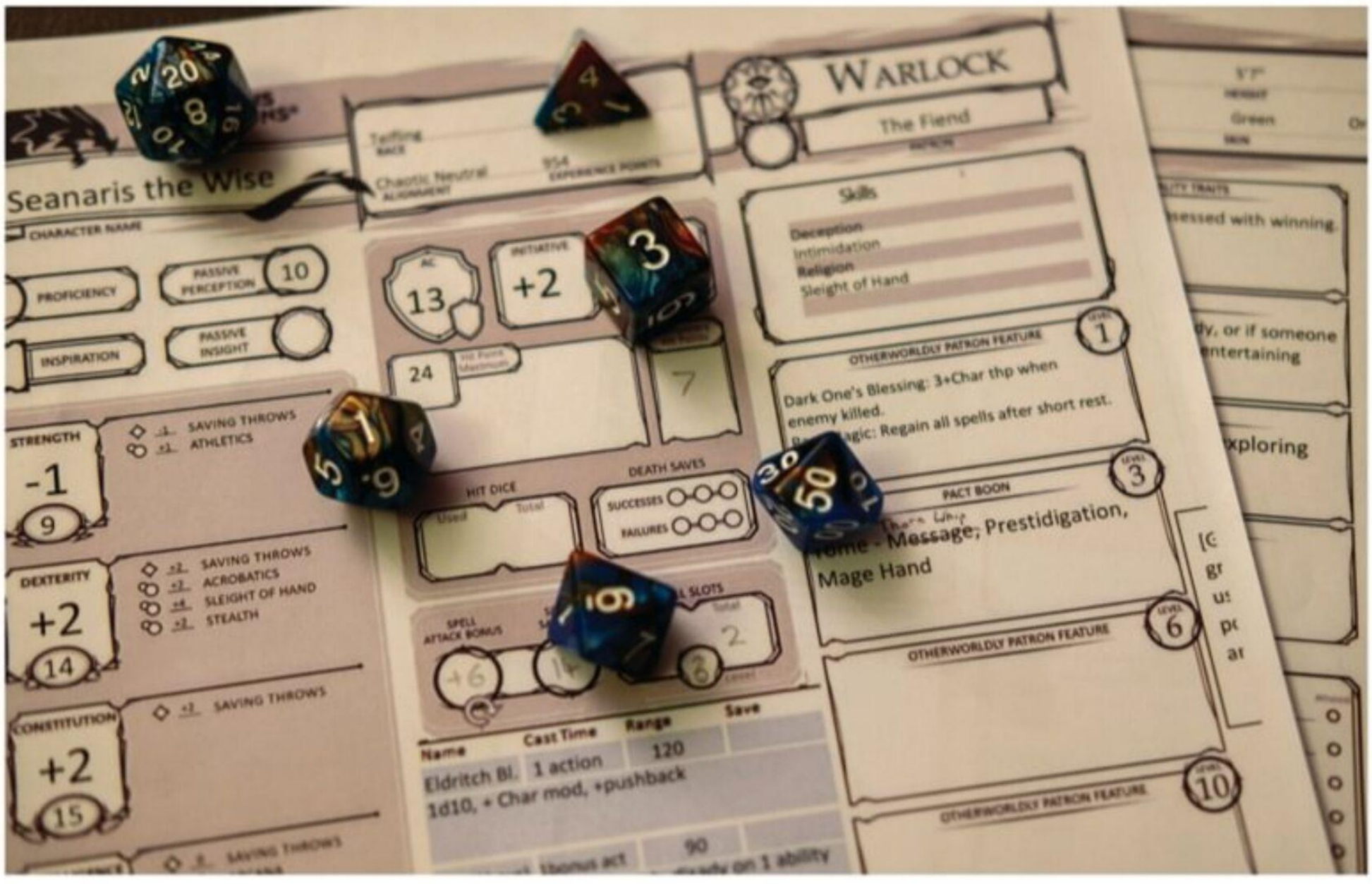
Besides, neither the word "dungeons" nor "dragons" particularly lit me up. The game had a *Heavy Metal* vibe to it—a magazine I appreciate as an adult, but one that I suspect was not aimed to appeal to young women and girls. At the time, it seemed to me that D&D was almost certainly about wielding huge swords (meh), killing dragons (zzz), and carrying bare-breasted damsels over your shoulder (woof). I was fine with my story-driven Star Wars chat room dramas, thank you very much.

It was only years later, around 2010, that I saw Acquisitions Incorporated on the main stage at the Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) in Seattle. For the uninitiated, Acquisitions Incorporated is a D&D party that stars the creators of the Penny Arcade webcomic and whoever they can talk into sharing a stage with them while they play hilarious games of D&D. These five dorky, lovable dudes played D&D in front of a packed theater and brought the house down. Until then, I doubt anyone thought of this hobby as having entertainment value. In fact, until then, I didn't realize what D&D actually was: It was stories. And I had to play it.

Hearing about other people's D&D games is like hearing about a dream they had—it sounds like complete nonsense to you, and you're not sure why they're telling you about it. I wasn't going to put you through it, but my editor for this piece says I should, so picture it: A party of adventurers pauses at the edge of a cliff, taking a moment's deserved rest, when suddenly the clicking of massive insect legs boils up over the precipice. Giant spiders! With a trademark holler ("cooOOOOokie crisp!"), my dwarf barbarian, Magsys Destinaxe, jumps into the fray. I roll a natural 20 on the die—a critical success. Magsys jumps on the back of a spider and rides it down the slope of the cliff, splitting it apart with her axe, until it slides gently to a halt safely at the bottom. (See what I mean? Dreadful.)

But talking about it further made me learn what D&D felt like. Since that first exposure in the coffee shop and later at Penny Arcade Expo, I have clocked hundreds of hours of D&D, both as a player and a Dungeon Master running the game. In 2017, Acquisition Incorporated invited me to be on their weekly streamed D&D show for several years, and I made some of the best friends of my life. I joined Wizards of the Coast, who have published the game since 1997, to become the first female game designer on D&D's fifth edition. I've run games for all kinds of people,

A D&D party exists in both the collective imagination, as the adventurers the players personify, and in person, as the players come together to tell a story.



The character sheet is both a building block of roleplay and the gateway into new realms. By documenting their unique game mechanics, players are then given freedom to improvise.

young and old, strangers and friends, old-timers and novices.

What I've found is that something mystical happens when you give yourself permission to play pretend. Being vulnerable and creative is a big part of it—you must trust and be trusted with what feels like subjective foolishness. But when you add the elements of collective imagination and improvisation, you create a strange alchemy that inscribes pathways in your brain, tangible as the memories of real life, even though it lives solely in the minds of a select few. Those pathways bond you in ways that no one else can understand. D&D and other tabletop roleplaying games (RPGs) are being used across the world, as a learning tool in classrooms and even as an effective form of therapy.

I started playing on *The "C" Team,* the Acquisitions Incorporated weekly live-streamed show, with four people I barely knew. As debilitating as it can be to play improvised pretend fantasy in front of a few other cooperating adults, it's beyond overwhelming to do it in front of hundreds of onlookers. I was terrified. But what I didn't expect is that the bond that typically extends to your table mates spread throughout a community of fans who witnessed the story alongside us. Our campaign was personalized in the imagination of each individual who followed the show, adding to and bolstering the tapestry of storytelling before us.

Something mystical happens when you give yourself permission to play pretend. You must trust and be trusted with what feels like subjective foolishness.

Letting go of inhibitions about playing pretend is difficult. Letting people in is, perhaps, even more so. People might think we're childish if we play pretend. They might make fun of us, laugh us out of our coffee shops. I do understand. But, you see, I have witnessed so much magic from people shaking off those inhibitions to weave stories together for themselves. And doesn't that matter so much more?

Maybe magic can't save us, but (unless it's an evocation spell) it certainly can't hurt. ◆

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Dungeons & Dragons

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Despite being a humanoid player species, Dragonborn have many of the traits of dragons. Depending on their draconic ancestry, they have an elemental breath weapon that also provides a damage resistance.

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DRACONIC MEASURES

The unique lore and abilities of the titular D&D creature have remained consistent throughout the franchise.

BY COURTNEY MIFSUD INTREGLIA

SMART AND CHARMING

All true dragons in D&D are depicted as intelligent and charismatic. Those dragons aligned with evil are quick to attack any adventurers, but there are some good dragons who might engage in a bit of diplomacy before they resort to bloodshed.

FLIGHT SPEEDS

In D&D dragons can dash, climb, and, most important, fly. An adult red dragon has a fly speed of 80 feet, or 160 feet per round if it takes the dash action. But its wings are not just for soaring. Dragons can use their appendages for an attack that bludgeons enemies.

BREATH WEAPONS

Each type of dragon has a different breath weapon, the cone-or line-shaped elemental-based attack exhaled by them. Red and gold dragons breathe fire, blue and bronze dragons breathe lightning, and white and silver dragons exhale frosty cold damage.

HOARDS AND LAIRS

Dragons are notoriously covetous, hoarding their mountains of treasure within their lairs. If players try to pilfer gold from a sleeping dragon's stash, they will likely have to endure rounds of challenging lair actions, including earthquakes and rocky fissures.

Twenty-Sided Stories

The limitless adventure of Dungeons & Dragons began with a roll of the dice 50 years ago, and the journeys have only grown more extraordinary since. Through many imaginations, D&D has adapted and redefined itself, attracting millions of devotees from realms far and wide.